

SHE “TOO MUCH OF WATER HAST”: DROWNINGS AND NEAR-DROWNINGS IN
TWENTIETH-CENTURY NORTH AMERICAN LITERATURE BY WOMEN

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Drowning is a frequent mode of death for female literary characters because of the strong symbolic relationship between female sexuality and water. Drowning has long been a punishment for sexually transgressive women in literature. In the introduction, Chapter 1, I describe the drowning paradigm and analyze drowning scenes in several pre-twentieth century works to establish the tradition which twentieth-century women writers begin to transcend.

In Chapter 2, I discuss three of Kate Chopin’s works which include drownings, demonstrating her transition from traditional drowning themes in *At Fault* and “Desiree’s Baby” to the drowning in *The Awakening*, which prefigures the survival of protagonists in later works. I discuss one of these in Chapter 3: Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Although Janie must rely on her husband to save her from the flood, she survives, though her husband does not.

In Chapter 4, I discuss two stories by Eudora Welty, “Moon Lake” and “The Wide Net.” In “Moon Lake,” Easter nearly drowns as a corollary to her adolescent sexual awakening. Although her resuscitation is a brutal simulation of a rape, Easter survives. “The Wide Net” is a comic story that winks at the drowning woman tradition, showing a young bride who pretends to drown in order to recapture the affections of her husband. Chapter 5 analyzes a set of works by Margaret Atwood. *Lady Oracle* includes another faked drowning, while “The Whirlpool Rapids” and “Walking on Water” feature a protagonist who feels invulnerable after her near-drowning. *The Blind Assassin* includes substantial drowning imagery. Chapter 6 discusses current trends in near-drowning fiction, focusing on the river rafting adventure stories of Pam Houston.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

WOMEN DROWNING, WOMEN SWIMMING:

A LITERARY OVERVIEW OF WOMEN'S DROWNING

AND NEAR-DROWNING EXPERIENCES

Drowning is a common mode of death for female characters in literature. Although actual drowning victims in contemporary America are predominantly male, their fictional counterparts are more likely to be female. Currently, men who die in “water transport” accidents outnumber women more than nine to one (United States 202), while in all other categories of deaths by drowning, whether suicide, accident, murder, or “undetermined whether accidentally or purposely inflicted,” men outnumber women by a lesser but still substantial margin (United States 214-224). In literature, however, the most likely drowning victim is a woman.

These literary women-who-drown tend to share certain characteristics. They are young, have had sexual experiences, usually illicit ones (or their community believes they have), and they die as a (usually indirect) punishment for their moral failings. Why drowning, in particular? There are several reasons. The first is the symbolic connection between female sexuality and water. Drowning is associated with women because of the link between female sexuality and liquid via the egress of menstrual blood and breast milk and the intake of semen. Further, water and that ubiquitous symbol of femininity, the moon, are

linked via tides. Gaston Bachelard, as translated by Elaine Showalter, likewise observes that drowning

becomes the truly feminine death in the dramas of literature and life, one which is a beautiful immersion and submersion in the female element. Water is the profound and organic symbol of the liquid woman whose eyes are so easily drowned in tears, as her body is the repository of blood, amniotic fluid, and milk. A man contemplating this feminine suicide understands it by reaching for what is feminine in himself, like Laertes, by a temporary surrender to his own fluidity-- that is, his tears; and he becomes a man again in becoming once more dry-- when his tears are stopped. (qtd. in Showalter "Representing" 81)

Thus, beginning at least as far back as Shakespeare's Ophelia, and continuing, with substantial modification and variation, to the present day, death by drowning is often the preferred literary punishment for the sexually transgressive woman.

The second reason is practical: prior to about 1920, women often did not know how to swim-- while boys might have been welcome to splash and swim in lakes and ponds, girls typically were not. Also, their clothing tended to be restrictive and heavy, so when women met water, they may have found it difficult to save themselves. The fiction of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries echoes this social reality. The third reason is romantic: drowning is often thought of as an "easy death"; its victims are often presented in pre-Raphaelite paintings, such as John Millais's *The Death of Ophelia*, as beautiful but tragic. Of course, actual drowning victims are anything but beautiful, as Hawthorne shows us in *The Blithedale Romance*. The fourth reason is cultural: there are pre-Victorian works, such as

Hamlet, which depict the romantically rejected drowned woman. But in the Victorian era, the paradigm of the drowned “fallen woman” gained momentum, as prostitution became an issue of societal concern and as Victorian sexual norms constrained women’s opportunities for sexual self-expression, and this paradigm carried over into the early twentieth century.

The typical pattern in the woman-drowns-as-sexual-punishment theme is something like this: boy meets girl. Boy and girl have sexual relationship. The boy moves on; the girl drowns herself, or the boy drowns her, or the girl drowns in an accident. One variation, that of *The Mill on the Floss*, is a bit different: the community thinks the boy and girl have had sexual relationship, but they have not. The girl drowns anyway. Dixie Lee Larsen frames the pattern that occurs in nineteenth-century fiction even more explicitly:

To begin, her [the drowned woman’s] fall is presumed to occur as a result of seduction, after which she is rejected or abandoned by her lover. Bereft of friends or family because of her disgraced condition, the outcast woman finds herself on the street. Her downward spiral is seen as inevitable. Her former beauty fades. Destitute and filled with despair, she sinks ever lower, until death seems preferable to life. Full of self-loathing, she is drawn to the river, where, one dark night, a leap into the water ends her miserable existence. (1)

But in the twentieth century, something interesting happens: female literary characters begin surviving their drowning-experiences. *The Awakening’s* Edna Pontellier is one of the last literary heroines in a work written by a woman who actually dies in the water. While some male authors continue to drown women characters throughout the twentieth century, female authors begin to insert “near-drowning” scenes in their fiction. In these

scenes, the female character who would have drowned in previous centuries has the opportunity to survive. At first, though, their survival is temporary (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*) or brutal (“Moon Lake”) or never in doubt, because the drowning was staged in the first place (“The Wide Net” and *Lady Oracle*). In the 1980's, however, we see yet another change. Women, physically strong, adventuresome women, are choosing to risk their lives in the water. Literary characters created in the second wave of feminism are free to confront the water that took the lives of so many of their predecessors. Edna Pontellier was being adventuresome when she learned to swim, but in the late twentieth century, women characters begin white water rafting, walking from one island to the next at low tide, and riding Niagara Falls in a raft. The protagonists Pam Houston creates, for instance, tempt death while riding rapids that regularly kill even the fittest and most athletic rafters of both genders. This literary continuum from passive, imposed death to active, chosen death to short-term or compromised survival to triumphant connection with the raging river is a microcosm of women's literature and women's history. Water, a traditional symbol of femininity, is no longer used *against* women to kill them, but is used *by* women to discover their own power.

Thus, while twentieth-century women characters often survive threats of death by drowning, they are part of a literary heritage of pre-twentieth-century women who do not survive. The differences in earlier authors' attitudes toward their drowned-women characters seem to be related to gender more than geography; women authors, whether British or American, tend to be more sympathetic than male authors to the drowned “fallen women.” The following is an overview of some pre-twentieth-century texts which include drowning scenes. My purpose is to reveal some of the most prevalent variations on the traditional

drowning theme, in order to emphasize the revolution that occurs in the twentieth-century North American texts I discuss in subsequent chapters.

Shakespeare's Ophelia: Drowning and Madness

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* features the prototypical drowning victim, Ophelia, demonstrating that the triad of love, betrayal, and death by drowning, with the occasional addition of the fourth that is madness, has been popular for at least four hundred years. Ophelia's drowning is either a suicide or an accident, depending on which critical (or directorial) perspective one prefers. Elaine Showalter, like the gravediggers in the play itself, calls it a suicide, precipitated by the Elizabethan malady of "female love-melancholy, or erotomania" ("Representing" 81). She observes, "On the stage, Ophelia's madness was presented as the predictable outcome" of this melancholy ("Representing" 81).

Although many drowned women have deviated from their culture's prescribed sexual behavior for women, Ophelia's behavior is not, apparently, offensive to her society's values, although this, too, has been the subject of critical debate. Instead, her drowning develops from a personal loss: she believes Hamlet has forsaken her. Showalter characterizes as "extreme" the Freudian readings in which Ophelia is a "loose woman" who "has been sleeping with Hamlet" ("Representing" 90). If these views are indeed implausible, she may not be the sexually initiated young woman who will be the typical literary drowning victim in centuries hence. However, Hamlet's cruelty to her, his sexual innuendo directed toward her, and his denial of their romantic involvement are undoubtedly what drive her to madness and then to death by drowning.

Whether Ophelia's death was accidental or deliberate is a debate that has been ongoing for decades. J.M. Nosworthy, writing in 1964, takes the view that Ophelia's death is an accident. He remarks upon a possible historical connection between Ophelia's death and that of a real-life accidental drowning victim, Katherine Hamlett (345). Nosworthy minimizes the connection between the two, yet remarks, "The vital point is that Ophelia's death, like Katherine's, is here presented as accidental. Of this there can be no possible doubt. She tried to climb a tree, the branch snapped, she fell into the brook, was incapable of saving herself, and was consequently drowned" (345).

Despite Nosworthy's confidence, there does appear to be possible doubt, and that doubt serves to underscore the symbolism surrounding watery deaths for women, and the symbolic difference between an accidental death and a suicidal one. Although the circumstances precipitating each kind of death may be similar, the suicide, no matter one's opinion of her judgment, is making a conscious and even potentially proactive and empowering choice. The victim of an accidental death is still at the mercy of forces outside herself, even though there may be circumstances in which a partially voiced and empowered character drowns by accident (Maggie Tulliver is one such character). If one chooses to read Ophelia as perpetually voiceless and choiceless, her death was probably reflective of her life, and therefore accidental. However, it is also possible that her death is a suicide, and thus her only self-willed act in the play.

Carol Chillington Rutter notes that in Zeffirelli's film version of *Hamlet*, "Ophelia's flight from Elsinore is coded as freedom" and her death is romanticized, with Ophelia-the-corpse shown floating on her back in a long-shot (308). Not only does this contemporary

portrayal reflect the four subsequent centuries of romantic drownings, but it reflects the romantic tone of Gertrude's eulogy upon learning of Ophelia's death:

There on the pendant boughs her crownet weeds
Clamb'ring to hang, an envious sliver broke,
When down her weedy trophies and herself
Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide,
And mermaid-like awhile they bore her up,
Which time she chaunted snatches of old lauds,
As one incapable of her own distress,
Or like a creature native and indued
Unto that element. But long it could not be
Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
Pull'd the poor wretch from her melodious lay
To muddy death. (1177)

However free she may be for her last few moments, Ophelia is ultimately shackled by her lack of autonomous voice and by her status as other.

Ophelia speaks with the voices of others throughout the play, including those of Polonius and the authors of her mad-songs. David Leverenz observes, "Not allowed to love and unable to be false, Ophelia breaks. She goes mad rather than gets mad. Even in her madness she has no voice of her own, only a discord of other voices and expectations, customs gone awry" (301). He further asserts, "Ophelia's drowning signifies the necessity of drowning both words and feelings if Hamlet is to act the role prescribed for him. That he does so is the real tragedy in the play" (303). Sandra K. Fischer notes that a feminist

approach to Hamlet must “notice that much of what transpires in the world of *Hamlet* is based on a stereotyped judgment of women as others” and “read female characters in as real and serious fashion as the males— as grappling with their identities, needing outlets for their conflicts, and trying to articulate... [even] when denied full voice, the voice of soliloquy especially, but also the voice of communication” (2). It is possible, then, that Ophelia, through the veil of her madness and of her many voices, none of which is her own, is finally able to make an independent choice via her drowning, albeit a tragic one.

Eliot’s Maggie: Redeemed Rather Than Punished

George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* incorporates a significant departure from the drowned woman tradition: Maggie Tulliver does not go mad and does not commit suicide. Instead, her drowning is an accident. Eliot’s narrator shows her awareness of Maggie’s literary forebears when she compares Maggie’s tragedy, not to Ophelia’s, but, interestingly, to Hamlet’s:

For the tragedy of our lives is not created entirely from within. ‘Character’-- says Novalis, in one of his questionable aphorisms— ‘character is destiny.’ But not the whole of our destiny. Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, was speculative and irresolute, and we have a great tragedy in consequence. But if his father had lived to a good old age, and his uncle had died an early death, we can conceive Hamlet’s having married Ophelia and got through life with a reputation of sanity notwithstanding many soliloquies, and some moody sarcasms toward the fair daughter of Polonius, to say nothing of the frankest incivility to his father-in-law. (514)

By linking Maggie with Hamlet, rather than Ophelia, the narrator seems to acknowledge Maggie's status as voiced (at least by the end of the novel) rather than voiceless. Also, Eliot is removing some of the blame for Maggie's death from Maggie herself and attributing it instead partially to the chance events of her life. This constitutes a major step in the development of the drowning plot.

Though Maggie's story represents an evolutionary advance from the drowning narratives which predate it, Maggie shares many characteristics with her drowned sisters who both follow and precede her: especially, she is both romantic and unlucky in love. In Maggie's case, an entanglement with her cousin's fiancé, though Maggie resists it as best she can, causes her to be dishonored in her community, which, as an illicit romance, leads inexorably to her death by drowning. Further, she seeks to make choices about her life, despite a culture that would punish her for doing so. Even though her death is not chosen, she dies after, and to some extent as a result of, beginning to make autonomous choices about her destiny.

Maggie's mother predicts her eventual mode of death when Maggie is a small child. Maggie's disobedience prompts her mother to observe, "Where's the use o' my telling you to keep away from the water? You'll tumble in and be drowned some day, an' then you'll be sorry you didn't do as mother told you" (61). Later, Mrs. Tulliver revisits this theme when Maggie is missing for two hours: "Goodness heart! she's got drowned" (90). Even this early in their lives, Mr. Tulliver recognizes the real reason for Maggie's disappearance, which is that Tom has "been naughty," or has done hurtful things to her (90). He appears to recognize the culpability of men and boys for Maggie's misadventures. However, by the

time of Maggie's final misadventure, her father has died, so is no longer able to "take her part."

On another, similar occasion, Maggie's little-girl jealousy over Tom's attentions leads her to push her cousin Lucy into the mud, in a comic imitation of drowning, then run away in an attempt to join up with the Gypsies. Mrs. Tulliver leads a party to search for Maggie near the pond: once again, if she is missing, she is presumed drowned. The repetition of Mrs. Tulliver's fears for her children, as well as Mr. Tulliver's greater understanding of the siblings' relationship, foreshadows the ending of the novel, since Tom's "naughtiness" to Maggie does not end until moments before they die together. He constantly criticizes and shuns her. James Diedrick observes, "Tom's repeated diminishment of Maggie has the effect of distorting her own moral self-estimate" so that she apologizes and begs for forgiveness even when she has done nothing wrong (37).

Although Mrs. Tulliver fears Maggie's death by drowning, Tom actively resists his, even in childhood. Tom and his friend Bob discuss the possibility of a flood, and Tom boasts, "'When I'm a man, I shall make a boat with a wooden house on the top of it, like Noah's ark.... And then if the flood came, you know, Bob, I shouldn't mind...And I'd take you in, if I saw you swimming,' he added, in the tone of a benevolent patron" (104). Even in his childish imaginings, then, Tom likens himself to that ultimate drowning-survivor, Noah, and perceives himself as invulnerable. Like other male characters in later near-drowning narratives such as Pam Houston's stories "Selway" and "Cataract," Tom sees the water as a force to be resisted and conquered.

In addition to this foreshadowing, water images and themes pervade *The Mill on the Floss*. The Floss, the river in which Maggie dies, is rich with meaning for her. Most

important events in her life are connected somehow with the river. She associates it first with her (grudgingly returned) love for her brother Tom. She says, “‘The first thing I ever remember in my life is standing with Tom by the side of the Floss while he held my hand—everything before that is dark to me’” (403). Her father’s mill, source of their income, their financial ruin, and Tom’s ambition, is run by the energy from the Floss. Likewise, her downfall begins as an innocent boating trip down the same river, a trip which determines Maggie’s destiny. Her companion and cousin’s fiancé, Stephen Guest, takes her too far down the river in hopes that she will marry him rather than ruin her reputation by staying out all night with a man and returning unwed.

Even some of the metaphors the narrator uses to describe Maggie are aqueous; she observes: “Maggie’s destiny, then, is at present hidden, and we must wait for it to reveal itself like the course of an unmapped river; we only know that the river is full and rapid, and that for all rivers there is the same final home” (514-15). Philip Wakem’s anxious dreams of Maggie further associate her with water: “...he fell into a doze in which he fancied Maggie was slipping down a glistening, green, slimy channel of a waterfall, and he was looking on helpless...” (544). These images firmly establish Maggie’s connection to the feminine water.

Like many other women literary characters doomed to die by drowning, Maggie is both intelligent and somewhat rebellious, defying conventional expectations of what a woman should be. When she is a child, her father says of her, “‘She understands what one’s talking about so as never was. And you should hear her read— straight off, as if she knowed it all beforehand. An’ allays at her book! But it’s bad— it’s bad’ Mr. Tulliver added, sadly, checking this blamable exultation, ‘a woman’s no business wi’ being so clever; it’ll turn to trouble, I doubt’” (66). As an intellectually searching woman, Maggie is in fact non-

normative in her community, and it is her otherness which enables her to identify with the physically handicapped and also intellectually searching Philip Wakem. Barbara Guth finds that Philip is significant because: “He enables Eliot to explore much more fully the tragedy of those who, because of their position outside society, perceive the world differently.

Clearly, Maggie and Philip feel out of place in their society, not only because they do not fit the cultural norms for members of their sex, but primarily because they desire more from life than the acquisition of material goods” (359). This otherness or separation from her community, which furthers their disapproval after her misadventure with Stephen Guest, is one of the factors contributing to her death.

Another characteristic which Maggie shares with many of her drowned and nearly-drowned comrades is not only the difficulty of making independent choices and creating a fully-formed sense of self, but also the urgent necessity of doing so. C. C. Barfoot observes, “Towards the end of the novel we hear increasingly Maggie’s articulation of her need to be able to choose, rather than drift or allow herself to be driven by the force of others” (94). Even though Maggie’s death is an accident, it does enable her to reunite with Tom, a goal which might be unachievable any other way, and enables her to escape her societal troubles. Although Barfoot is apparently using “drift” as a metaphor here, Maggie’s final act is to row (an active choice, rather than passive drifting) to rescue her brother. So at the end of her life, she does seize control. Not all critics see the ending of the novel as a manifestation of Maggie’s newly gained sense of self, however. Beryl Gray remarks:

...Maggie has made the transition from the ideal of self-suppression required by Thomas à Kempis, to the painful need for self-denial which her own inmost soul makes mandatory. Her ability finally to resist the strange power

of Stephen's voice— a power that is reinforced by his misery— is a moral triumph, and it earns her the blessing at last of reunion with Tom in the shared, momentarily regained, Paradise of childhood. (17)

Although Maggie is certainly beginning to leave behind her earlier self-suppression, she is not exchanging it for self-denial, but rather for self-dominion-- the ability to make independent choices about her life. It is certainly true that Maggie was deeply attracted to Stephen, but her reasons for choosing not to marry him go far beyond self-denial. After all, he had misled her throughout their rowing expedition. This, combined with his abnegation of his responsibility to Lucy, does not speak well of his character, and character is clearly of much importance to Maggie. To marry Stephen would have been denying self. Not marrying him is acknowledging self. While such self-dominion might have resulted in survival for the twentieth-century literary characters I will examine in later chapters, Maggie's culture does not permit a young woman who is perceived to have violated societal protocols about female sexuality to survive her drowning incident— the insult to cultural norms is still too great.

Unlike many other drowned women in pre-twentieth-century literature, Maggie is comfortable on the water. This comfort is what enables her to seize control of the boat in her final scene. We know about Maggie's competence as a rower because her cousin Lucy says, as they prepare to go boating, "If the Floss were but a quiet lake instead of a river, we should be independent of any gentleman, for Maggie can row splendidly" (584). The irony of this remark becomes clear later, when Maggie rows independently and competently not just on the river, but on the river during a flood.

Although Maggie is able to obtain a boat when the Floss floods, obtaining the boat leads to both her and Tom's deaths. She paddles the boat to rescue Tom, who is at the Mill. All is well while Maggie is at the oars; it is only after she rescues Tom and he takes over the job of rowing, an assumption of masculine power and control, that they are killed. As they are going to check on their cousin Lucy:

...A new danger was being carried towards them by the river. Some wooden machinery had just given way on one of the wharves, and huge fragments were being floated along.... A large company in a boat that was working its way along under the Tofton houses, observed their danger, and shouted, 'Get out of the current!'

But that could not be done at once, and Tom, looking before him, saw Death rushing on them. Huge fragments, clinging together in fatal fellowship, made one wide mass across the stream.

'It is coming, Maggie!' Tom said, in a deep hoarse voice, loosing the oars, and clasping her.

The next instant the boat was no longer seen upon the water— and the huge mass was hurrying on in hideous triumph.... The boat reappeared— but brother and sister had gone down in an embrace never to be parted— living through again in one supreme moment, the days when they had clasped their little hands in love, and roamed the daisied fields together. (655)

Numerous critics, including Bulwer-Lytton and Henry James, as well as some of their more contemporary counterparts, have expressed dissatisfaction with the ending (Kerry McSweeney nicely summarizes these viewpoints). Interestingly, Bulwer-Lytton notes that

“Tom indeed has...been set so far apart from his sister, that he can’t be jerked back into the old boyish love of a sudden, and we don’t see why *he* should be drowned at all” (emphasis added; qtd. in McSweeney 56). Apparently, Bulwer-Lytton has no objection to Maggie’s death by drowning, which is unsurprising considering the prevalence of the drowned woman motif; Maggie’s death is only to be expected, while Tom’s must have come as a surprise to many of the original readers of *The Mill on the Floss*. Maggie’s rejection by the community of St. Ogg’s after her misadventure with Stephen Guest is inherently predictive of her eventual drowning. In fact, Oliver Lovesey observes that, since Tom might have been safer had he stayed at the Mill rather than getting in the boat with Maggie, “This ambiguity...raises the possibility that Maggie and Tom’s deaths signal Maggie’s final infraction against social and moral codes” (49). Maggie’s newly empowered rowing, then, far from saving Tom, indirectly causes both their deaths. Seemingly, Maggie is punished not only for her indiscretion with Stephen Guest, but also for her attempts at autonomy. Contrast this scene with the rafting scenes in Pam Houston’s short fiction, discussed in Chapter 6, to discover how far the drowned woman paradigm has advanced in the past 150 years. Infraction or no, Maggie’s death does seem to reflect her decision to be an active participant in her own life, a choice reflected in McSweeney’s observation, “Maggie is thus granted the grace of a happy death; it is in radiance and not in gloom that her life and the novel end” (58). Although McSweeney here romanticizes Maggie’s death more than is, perhaps, called for by the text, Maggie, more so than many victims of accidental drownings, is self-fulfilled and self-determining at the time of her death.

Hawthorne's Zenobia: The Drowned Body as Rape Victim

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* includes a drowned woman who certainly does not die in radiance. In fact, critic after critic has puzzled over Zenobia's abrupt death. Did Hawthorne feel obliged to kill her off because he had patterned her after Margaret Fuller, who drowned just off the American coast in an 1850 shipwreck? Was he inspired to have her drown because a few years before penning *The Blithedale Romance*, he had been called out to help find the body of Margaret Hunt, a young woman who had drowned herself in the Concord River (Turner 12)? Undoubtedly these experiences influenced Hawthorne, and it is now generally accepted that Fuller was Hawthorne's model for Zenobia, although Arlin Turner points out, in a rare dissenting opinion, "It seems hardly necessary to see in Zenobia a derogatory portrait of Miss Fuller" (13). But what is perhaps more influential in determining the reasons for Zenobia's drowning is the tradition that the woman wronged in love must give herself up to the waters. When Hawthorne writes in opposition to that tradition, he manages to create his most memorable character, Hester Prynne. But when he bows to the tradition, he creates Zenobia, a colorful, intelligent, strong woman who, when faced with reversals in love and fortune, abruptly drowns. Thus, although Hawthorne is clearly willing to create strong female characters, including Hester, who overcome far harsher circumstances than Zenobia's, in this case Hawthorne succumbs to the temptation of patriarchal oppression. He demonstrates that there can be no happy ending for a character such as Zenobia, who does not possess many of the "feminine virtues": she is not maternal toward or nurturing of her sister Priscilla, she is not humble, she is not modest, and furthermore, she is a lousy cook.

So Hawthorne engineers Zenobia's death scene with notable indignity and gruesomeness, leaving the wraithlike, insubstantial Priscilla to prevail as the model of appropriate, acceptable femininity. Priscilla not only gets all of Zenobia's money, but also gets her lover; as an added bonus, the narrator reveals *his* love for Priscilla in the final sentence of the novel. Unlike most of the narratives in the drowning-fiction *oeuvre*, in which the reason for the drowned woman's death is apparent, the reason for and even, perhaps, the manner of Zenobia's death are less well-defined. It is never completely clear that Zenobia has committed suicide. It is possible that her death was accidental; however, Zenobia's unusual autonomy and self-dominion make her an unlikely candidate for an accidental drowning death.

But Miles Coverdale, narrator of *The Blithedale Romance*, clearly does believe that Zenobia's death was a suicide. This belief is based on Coverdale's own prejudices, however, rather than on any evidence. Coverdale is one resident of Blithedale, a farming commune modeled on Brook Farm, the experimental community at which Hawthorne briefly lived. One frequent assumption is that Hawthorne patterned his narrator on himself. If so, Hawthorne certainly did not paint a very flattering self-portrait, since Coverdale is an untrustworthy narrator and a flawed personality. He controls the narrative, and thus Zenobia's story, by withholding information. He extols Zenobia's literary accomplishments, then trivializes them. And when he first meets Zenobia, he describes her in the sexualized, even lascivious way that foretells his attitude toward her throughout the novel. Coverdale notes, "She was dressed as simply as possible, in an American print..., but with a silken kerchief, between which and her gown there was one glimpse of a white shoulder. It struck me as a great piece of good fortune that there should be just that glimpse" (42). He

repeatedly refers to the fineness of her body, often in the same breath with his discussion of her mental powers: "It did one good to see a fine intellect (as hers really was, although its natural tendency lay in another direction than towards literature) so fitly cased" (43).

Although Zenobia certainly has much of the flirt about her manner, and perhaps encourages Coverdale's sexual thoughts, his reaction to her flirtation borders on the lecherous. After Zenobia jokingly notes that she will not don "the garb of Eden" "till after May-day!" (44), Coverdale observes:

Assuredly, Zenobia could not have intended it;-- the fault must have been entirely in my imagination. But these last words, together with something in her manner, irresistibly brought up a picture of that fine perfectly developed figure, in Eve's earliest garment. Her free, careless, generous modes of expression, often had this effect, of creating images, which, though pure, are hardly felt to be quite decorous when born of a thought which passes between man and woman. (44)

Coverdale, then, wishes to believe that his own sexual fantasies are somehow Zenobia's responsibility, but still tries to rationalize them as "pure." Coverdale's sexual interest in Zenobia extends to frequent speculation about her virginity:

As anybody could observe, the freedom of her deportment... was not exactly maiden-like. What girl had ever laughed as Zenobia did? What girl had ever spoken in her mellow tones? Her unconstrained and inevitable manifestation, I said often to myself, was that of a woman to whom wedlock had thrown wide the gates of mystery. Yet sometimes I strove to be ashamed of these conjectures. (71)

Coverdale's attitude toward what Thomas F. Strychacz calls "Zenobia's half-hearted feminism" (29) is equally qualified. Although Coverdale occasionally expresses sympathy for Zenobia's feminist beliefs, he typically does so in order to ally himself with her against his romantic rival, Hollingsworth. Also, he frequently demeans both her beliefs and her intelligence. He notes, "I recognized no severe culture in Zenobia; her mind was full of weeds" (68).

Coverdale is clearly a conflicted and unreliable narrator who describes scenes he could not have witnessed. For instance, he describes Priscilla's history before coming to Blithedale, a description which is apparently pure fantasy on Coverdale's part:

She had been bred up, no doubt, in some close nook, some inauspiciously sheltered court of the city, where the uttermost rate of a tempest, though it might scatter down the slates of the roof into the bricked area, could not shake the casement of her little room. The sense of vast, undefined space, pressing from the outside against the black panes of our uncurtained windows, was fearful to the girl, heretofore accustomed to the narrowness of human limits, with the lamps of neighboring tenements glittering across the street. The house probably seemed to her adrift on the great ocean of the night. A little parallelogram of sky was all that she had hitherto known of nature, so that she felt the awfulness that really exists in its limitless extent. (60-61)

Laura E. Tanner observes about this passage, "Coverdale is gradually swept up by the force of his own romantic vision until that vision comes to assume the status of reality. What

begins as qualified speculation signalled by phrases such as ‘no doubt’ and ‘probably’ slowly gives way to definitive declaration” (4).

Coverdale’s untrustworthy and speculative comments extend to his descriptions of Zenobia. He frequently makes assumptions about Zenobia’s past, and, more relevantly to this discussion, her motivations. For instance, after Zenobia’s death, Coverdale notes, “It was a woful thought, that a woman of Zenobia’s diversified capacity should have fancied herself irretrievably defeated on the broad battlefield of life, and with no refuge, save to fall on her own sword, merely because Love had gone against her” (245). So Coverdale assumes that Zenobia’s failed love for Hollingsworth has caused her to drown herself. However, some critics have pointed out that not only does Coverdale have little support for many of his speculations, but also is making an unprovable assumption here that Zenobia indeed committed suicide, rather than dying by accident. Mary Suzanne Schriber notes:

Coverdale reports that Zenobia commits suicide. Yet Zenobia’s death might, after all, have been accidental rather than intentional. Critics have understandably accepted Coverdale’s word on the matter because Hawthorne records in his notebook an incident of a young woman’s [Margaret Hunt’s] suicide in language quite similar to Coverdale’s. Yet critics have less justifiably subscribed to Coverdale’s second assumption: that Zenobia dies for love of Hollingsworth. (75-76).

Of course, Schriber’s set of possible reasons for Zenobia’s death, an accidental drowning or “despair...because she loses all hope for the improvement of woman’s lot” (76), are, as Tanner observes, equally as speculative as Coverdale’s (1). Nonetheless, there are plausible

alternative explanations for Zenobia's death. Those alternatives, however, do not align so closely with the drowned-woman paradigm, a paradigm which Coverdale clearly embraces.

The drowning scene itself is made possible by the cultural norms that overarch all scenes of this type: the archetype of the drowned woman as sexually sinning or abandoned lover. While Coverdale's earlier speculations about Zenobia's virginity certainly prepare the reader for this archetype, the scene in which Coverdale and his colleagues recover Zenobia's body is the most overtly sexualized of its type.

In the chapter titled "Midnight," Coverdale decides that Zenobia has drowned herself. His evidence is her handkerchief, which he has found near the riverbank. Either this turn of plot is a narrative weakness, for surely, if a person found a friend's handkerchief, his first thought would not ordinarily be that she had killed herself; or, perhaps, this is another example of Coverdale's withholding information from his readers. He reports that in his final conversation with Zenobia, she expresses her intent to convert to Catholicism, "for the sake of going into a nunnery" (232). Ffrangcon Lewis aptly notes the similarity of this pronouncement to that of Hamlet's admonition to the similarly-doomed Ophelia, "Get thee to a nunnery" (77). While Zenobia's last conversation with Coverdale is dramatic, it is no more so than might be expected from a woman who is not only upset, but also theatrical by nature. Zenobia gives no hint that suicide is in her plans, nor is there much in the way of textual preparation for her death. Zenobia's death comes as a shock to many readers not by its mere fact, but by its lack of affinity with the rest of the romance, either in plot construction or tone.

When Zenobia does vanish, apparently into the river, Hollingsworth and Silas Foster, the farm manager, join Coverdale to search for her. Foster objects that she could

not have committed suicide: ““Why, she has more means than she could use or waste, and lacks nothing to make her comfortable but a husband, and that’s an article she could have, any day”” (235). His statement must seem ironic to both Coverdale and Hollingsworth, who know of her financial reversals-- her fortune actually belongs to Priscilla-- and the recent failure of her romance with Hollingsworth. Nevertheless, Coverdale is all too eager to stereotype Zenobia, to strip her of her individuality. Unlike many of the other drowned women discussed here, many of whom indeed die because of romantic troubles, Zenobia has no narrative voice, either her own or that of an omniscient narrator, to let us know what has happened, nor does she leave any note or clue. So Coverdale’s suppositions are the only explanation readers have. However, instead of reflecting any objective reality, the description Coverdale provides of Zenobia’s motivations represents only his assumptions-- and he is a product of his culture, in which the wronged woman is supposed to kill herself.

Thus, Zenobia’s death becomes a gruesome parody of the archetype of the drowned woman. As I have shown, one of the criteria for this archetype is real or perceived sexual transgression on the part of the drowning victim. Readers have no evidence of any sexual misbehavior on Zenobia’s part, despite Coverdale’s voyeuristic interest in her past and speculation about her virginity. Nevertheless, the search for Zenobia’s body itself becomes a metaphor for a violent sexual experience. The trio of men searches for Zenobia under a feminine moon-symbol, a moon described as, like Zenobia, past its earliest bloom but still beautiful: “The moon that night, though past the full, was still large and oval” (237). The remainder of the search is full of images of masculine sexuality. The search for Zenobia becomes a figurative rape as the men seek her body with “the long pole, with the hook at the end... and a couple of long-handled hay-rakes” (236). Coverdale observes, too, “Silas Foster

plied his rake manfully, poking it as far as he could into the water, and immersing the whole length of his arm besides” (237). Hollingsworth has a different technique, but one which also becomes a parody of the sex act: “Hollingsworth at first sat motionless, with the hooked pole elevated in the air. But, by and by, with a nervous and jerky movement, he began to plunge it into the blackness that upbore us, setting his teeth, and making precisely such thrusts, methought, as if he were stabbing at a deadly enemy” (237-38). When the trio does find Zenobia, the initial description of her is slightly romanticized: “It was the flow of a woman’s garments. A little higher, and we saw her dark hair streaming down the current” (239). However, Coverdale’s description of Zenobia’s body is brutally naturalistic, and more disturbingly vivid than any comparable scene in literature, *Madame Bovary* perhaps excepted:

Were I to describe the perfect horror of the spectacle, the reader might justly reckon it to me for a sin and a shame. For more than twelve long years I have borne it in my memory, and could now reproduce it as freshly as if it were still before my eyes. Of all modes of death, methinks it is the ugliest. Her wet garments swathed limbs of terrible inflexibility. She was the marble image of a death-agony. Her arms had grown rigid in the act of struggling, and were bent before her with clenched hands; her knees, too, were bent, and— thank God for it!-- in the attitude of prayer. Ah, that rigidity! It is impossible to bear the terror of it. (239-40)

As in so many other instances, then, Coverdale tells his readers one thing and proceeds to do another— he lets us know that Zenobia’s death is too gruesome to tell, then tells all about it. And not only does he tell his readers about Zenobia’s appearance, but he also speculates about why she (as he assumes) chose her mode of death— he decides it is because “She had

seen pictures... of drowned persons in lithe and graceful attitudes. And she deemed it well and decorous to die as so many village-maidens have, wronged in their first love, and seeking peace in the bosom of the old, familiar stream" (241). By naturalistically describing Zenobia's death, but romantically ascribing Madame-Bovary-esque reasons for it, he continues to undercut and even humiliate Zenobia. Elaine Showalter observes that not only is "Coverdale's view of Zenobia's feminism...steadily satiric" but also that he can not resist getting his last digs in: "Coverdale even finds her suicide arty" (*Inventing* 59).

The story of Zenobia's death is also, in large part, the story of Coverdale's shaky psychology. Coverdale is so threatened by Zenobia's intelligence, beauty, and sexuality, as well as her inaccessibility to him, that he feels it necessary to simultaneously insult and compliment her. He also represents the Romantic tradition that a woman scorned will inevitably find death preferable to living what must be a tortured, pathetic life. What is less plain, however, is to what extent Coverdale is a mouthpiece for Hawthorne's own beliefs. Does Hawthorne maintain the Romantic worldview that would lead Zenobia inevitably down the path to suicide? Or is Hawthorne in fact mocking that view? Are we to assume, along with Coverdale, that Zenobia killed herself? Or are we to see *The Blithedale Romance* as a mystery novel which does not tidily tie up all of the threads at the end? And what are we to make of Coverdale's declaration, in the final sentence of the novel, that he is in love with Zenobia's shadowy and insubstantial half-sister Priscilla (251), when textual evidence indicates that he is in fact enamored of Zenobia? The unreliability of Coverdale as narrator, and the consequent inaccessibility of Zenobia's point of view, makes the answers to these questions as unknowable as Coverdale himself.

Dreiser's Roberta: Her Punisher Punished

The publication of *The Awakening* in 1899 signaled a significant shift in the paradigm of the drowned woman as created by women authors. Even well into the twentieth century, however, male authors such as Theodore Dreiser continued to drown the female characters they create. Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*, published in 1925, features a prototypical drowning, in this case a murder, in which the drowning victim, Roberta Alden, is punished by her lover for getting pregnant. Like *The Blithedale Romance*, *An American Tragedy* is told from the perspective of the male protagonist, although Dreiser's narrator is a third- rather than first-person one. Although Nancy Davis believes that Dreiser portrays Roberta as "the seduced working girl whom he refused to judge as evil" (43), Dreiser shows little sympathy for the drowned, pregnant victim, in fact sympathizing with her murderer, Clyde Griffiths, a man who objectifies all the women he encounters, as Susan Wolstenholme asserts (244).

Even the drowning scene itself, in which the couple is in a rented rowboat, is more sympathetic to the perpetrator than the victim:

...as she drew near him, seeking to take his hand in hers and the camera from him in order to put it in the boat, he flinging out at her, but not even then with any intention to do other than free himself of her— her touch— her pleading— consoling sympathy— her presence forever— God!

Yet (the camera still unconsciously held tight) pushing at her with so much vehemence as not only to strike her lips and nose and chin with it, but to throw her back sidewise toward the left wale which caused the boat to careen to the very water's edge. And then he, stirred by her sharp scream, (as much due to the lurch of the boat, as the cut on her nose and lip), rising and

reaching half to assist or recapture her and half to apologize for the unintended blow— yet in so doing completely capsizing the boat— himself and Roberta being as instantly thrown into the water. And the left wale of the boat as it turned, striking Roberta on the head as she sank and then rose for the first time, her frantic, contorted face turned to Clyde, who by now had righted himself. For she was stunned, horror-struck, unintelligible with pain and fear— her lifelong fear of water and drowning and the blow he had so accidentally and all but unconsciously administered. (531)

Clyde chooses not to rescue Roberta, recognizing the playing-out of the drowning scene, the end to all his troubles, that he has previously fantasized about.

Although Clyde is eventually brought to trial, convicted, and executed for Roberta's murder, the narrator partly blames the class system that encourages Clyde's social climbing, as he courts working-class Roberta then replaces her with leisure-class Sondra, rather than attributing Clyde's decision primarily to his own poor judgment and avoidance of responsibility.

What makes this text different from any of the woman-authored texts I discuss here, but allies it with *The Blithedale Romance*, is the overt hostility which the male protagonist feels, not just for the drowned woman, but for women in general. Wolstenholme writes:

...Clyde's blind thrust [at Roberta] suggests that he is striking out at the great pregnant mother-force. One might suggest that those critics who exonerate Clyde do so on the grounds that Clyde only expresses the culturally normal hatred for women and what they represent. To suggest that Clyde is guilty of

murder is to hold men responsible for their expressed hatred for women.

(259)

Some male authors, then, such as Dreiser and Hawthorne, use the drowning motif as a tool to present their male characters' misogyny. It is as if only an image this powerful, this deadly, yet so intimately associated with femininity is sufficient to project the difficulty both Clyde Griffiths and Miles Coverdale have in appreciating women as anything other than sexualized objects, or, in Clyde's case, tools to achieve his social ambitions.

Many women authors, such as Eliot, Kate Chopin, Zora Neale Hurston, Eudora Welty, Margaret Atwood, and Pam Houston, present a view of drownings and near-drownings that is freeing and, as the twentieth century progresses, increasingly empowering for the female characters they create. In the earliest works I discuss, Kate Chopin's traditional novel *At Fault* and her revolutionary novel *The Awakening*, the female protagonist still drowns. In *At Fault*, Chopin is fettered by conventional views of the drowning archetype, and Fanny drowns as a punishment for her alcoholism and for the sexually profligate company she keeps. By the time she writes *The Awakening*, however, Chopin is capable of creating a character whose death is a choice, and a result of living in a society in which there are too few choices for women.

Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* represents yet another huge leap forward in the drowned woman paradigm— or in this case, for the first time, the near-drowned woman paradigm. For Janie lives, where all her predecessors die. She is a woman who takes joy in her own sexuality, yet when faced with a flood and a fall into the water, she does not die— though she is still punished, indirectly, since her husband dies as a result of his attempts to save her.

Eudora Welty's stories "Moon Lake" and "The Wide Net" both include drowning scenarios. Although the adolescent near-drowning victim in "Moon Lake" survives her fall into the water, she is resuscitated by a Boy Scout in a brutal scene that approximates a rape. So although she survives, she is still punished both for her emerging sexuality and for her attempts to transcend traditional female roles. "The Wide Net" is an interesting variant on the drowning-story, since it is a comedy which uses the drowning trope to build a narrative about, in essence, the development of understanding between the partners in a traditional marriage. The intriguing feature of this story is its dependence on the reader's recognition of the drowning-scene as a familiar feature in narratives about women, so when we learn at the end of the story that the supposed drowning was a trick, that the supposed drowning victim Hazel was safe in her home all along, we can wink and smile along with the narrator.

Like Eudora Welty, Canadian writer Margaret Atwood frequently uses near-drownings in her fiction, and, like "The Wide Net," Atwood's novel *Lady Oracle* incorporates a faked drowning (although Joan's is considerably more elaborate than Hazel's), while Atwood's short stories "The Whirlpool Rapids" and "Walking on Water" advance the drowning-scenario one big step further. For in these stories, Emma, the protagonist of both, is not a victim—of a flood, a violent resuscitation, or any other horror. Rather, she is an adventuresome young woman who confronts water on a lark and has a pair of misadventures, one resulting in the drowning death of a man, the other nearly doing so.

Atwood's stories prepare the path for current fiction, both her own (including her most recent novel, *The Blind Assassin*) and the work of the next generation of writers such as Pam Houston, who writes, in essence, adventure stories with women characters. In these stories, young women have sexual freedom that Edna Pontellier never even dreamed of,

although they continue to have difficulty finding satisfying relationships with their male partners, a problem with which Edna was familiar. But now, they are free to confront the drowning waters. The protagonists of Houston's rafting stories confront some of the most dangerous rivers in America, willfully challenging the water that has killed so many of their literary foremothers— and they survive.

Clearly, then, there has been a progression in drowning fiction from the mad, voiceless Ophelia to the empowered, physically and mentally strong woman of the late twentieth century who does not go mad, who does not drown when her boat capsizes, but who swims for safety nearly every time— and is free from the punitive societal restrictions that Maggie Tulliver and Edna Pontellier faced, as well.

CHAPTER 2

KATE CHOPIN AND THE DROWNED WOMAN:
FROM TRADITION TO TRANSITION

While *The Awakening* is a revolutionary treatment of the familiar subject of the drowning woman, Kate Chopin's earlier works that feature a drowning woman are far more conventional. These earlier works, the novel *At Fault* and the short story "Desiree's Baby," show a progression in Chopin's writing. *At Fault* is an unremarkable late nineteenth century domestic sentimental novel, in which a sinning woman drowns as a sort of cleansing, while "Desiree's Baby" includes an intensely sympathetic protagonist who drowns herself in despair after mistreatment by her husband. These works, though without the originality of theme and plot seen in *The Awakening*, do show an interesting development in Chopin's treatment of the drowning woman, while *The Awakening* represents a transition between the drowning-as-punishment themes of the nineteenth century and the survival narratives seen in twentieth-century fiction by women.

At Fault: Chopin's Traditional Drowning Novel

Chopin's first novel, *At Fault*, published in 1890, contains a variety of elements typical of "women's fiction" of the period: an emphasis on temperance, the glorification of the self-sacrificial woman, and the drowning of a morally compromised female character. Although *At Fault* contains many elements which will recur in Chopin's later fiction, not the least of which is the drowning trope, it is essentially a conventional novel that endorses the

conservative cultural mores of late-nineteenth-century America. The drowning woman in *At Fault* is Fanny Hosmer, wife of the male protagonist David Hosmer. Her doom is predictable from the start; not only does Fanny meet many of the criteria for the drowned woman, but also, in a novel by a relatively inexperienced author, Fanny's drowning is a convenient way to dispense of an inconvenient character.

Since unlike *The Awakening*, *At Fault* is difficult to find and rarely read, a bit of information about its plot may be helpful. David Hosmer is a businessman who moves from St. Louis to Creole Louisiana, thus meeting Thérèse Lafirme, a widow who is running her husband's mill. After declaring his love for Thérèse, David then admits that he is divorced. The Catholic Thérèse finds divorce morally wrong, and persuades David that he must go to St. Louis, locate and remarry Fanny, and bring her back to Louisiana, which he does—ironically not for the love of his wife, but for the love of another woman, Thérèse herself. Fanny, however, suffers from alcoholism. Her condition gradually worsens, culminating in a drunken escapade that results in her drowning, during which David nearly dies in his attempt to rescue her. After Fanny's death, though, David and Thérèse are free to marry; the final chapter of the novel shows their newly-wedded bliss.

In several respects, then, *At Fault* is a conventional "drowning novel." The drowned woman is punished because of a moral failing, in this case her alcoholism. We see her in contrast to the seemingly flawless Thérèse, who is devoutly religious and espouses temperance, but in a manner that seems charitable rather than self-righteous. Unlike the typical drowned woman, however, Fanny's sin is not a sexual one, at least not directly. However, in presenting her alcohol problem as a moral issue, Chopin aligns Fanny with other drowning victims such as Maggie Tulliver, Roberta, and Zenobia in that her "sin" is a

lack of self-restraint. Although Fanny herself does not exhibit sexual immorality (as defined by the text), one of her friends does exhibit such immorality, so Fanny's memory is tainted with guilt by association.

The entire construction of Fanny, her habits, and her friends encourages the reader to perceive Fanny negatively. Readers are encouraged to sympathize with David Hosmer and his plight, and are driven to perceive Fanny as an albatross around David's neck. Where Fanny is hedonistic and troubled, David is stoic, albeit resentful, as he accepts his role as Fanny's once and future husband:

The woman who had formerly made his life colorless and empty he had quietly turned his back upon, carrying with him a pity that was not untender. But the woman who had unwittingly robbed him of all possibility of earthly happiness— he hated her. The woman who for the remainder of a life-time was to be in all the world the nearest thing to him, he hated her. He hated this woman of whom he must be so careful, to whom he must be tender, and loyal and generous. And to give no sign or work but of kindness; to do no action that was not considerate, was the task which destiny had thrust upon his honor. (75-76)

Chopin presents Fanny as being self-absorbed even when she is not drunk; Fanny is mistrustful, frivolous, and inflexible, and the narrator seems to seize most every opportunity to paint Fanny in an unflattering light. Still, we are permitted flickers of sympathy for Fanny when she remarries David; after all, she is a stranger in a strange land. But all of this sympathy is stifled when Fanny begins drinking. Her alcoholism is explicitly framed as a moral failing parallel to sexual licentiousness.

Obtaining alcohol involves clandestine meetings with the male servant who procures her spirits, and her drunkenness results in David's feeling miserable and anguished, perhaps not unlike the pain he would feel if she were carrying on a love affair. Instead of sympathy for Fanny, we are encouraged to feel sympathy for David, whose synthetic loyalty to his wife prevents him from acting on his love for Thérèse. Further, Fanny's jealousy toward Thérèse might in other circumstances, in other novels, invite empathy from the reader—after all, she and her husband are living in close proximity to the woman whom her husband loves. However, the narrator shows Fanny's jealousy to be irrational, and even rather ungrateful, since Thérèse motivates David to return to St. Louis and remarry Fanny. Though Thérèse is by her own admission the one “at fault” (206) by persuading David to remarry Fanny, because she places abstract morality over the happiness of both Fanny and David, nonetheless, it is Thérèse's morality that prevails. She may be sadder but wiser at the end of *At Fault*, but Fanny is dead, and Thérèse is now free to marry the man she loves, now that he is a widower rather than a divorcé. She is, in fact, rewarded for being “faulty” since, as Linda Wagner-Martin observes, her “saintly” behavior does get her man (200).

Fanny's death is in some respects a continuation of the pattern begun by the two previous violent deaths in the novel— one the arsonist Joçint, and the other his murderer, Grégoire. Although Joçint and Grégoire have both committed serious crimes, they are mourned more than is the comparatively innocent Fanny. These two mens' deaths are both framed as tragedies on the one hand, but remedies, especially in Joçint's case, from the proximity of a troublesome person. The men are quite different in many ways: if there is one truly evil character in the novel, it is Joçint— he even murders his own dog— while Grégoire, whom Thérèse adores, is presented as impulsive and self-indulgent rather than

evil. But these deaths (both via gunshots, a frequent literary mode of death for men, but more rarely for women) serve to prepare the reader for Fanny's similar death— she, too, is an inconvenience and a hindrance to several of the other characters, especially David and Thérèse.

When Fanny drowns as a sort of punishment for her frenzied quest for alcohol, her death is narrated as a dramatic scene followed by welcome relief for all associated with her. During a violent storm, Fanny leaves home in search of liquor. After obtaining it, she visits the home of Marie Louise, an African-American servant whose home, through gradual erosion of the riverbank, is now on the very edge of the precipice. David searches for and locates Fanny, but fails to convince her to return home with him. He boards the return ferry, but then he hears a “shrill, piercing, feminine scream” (198), and looks toward Marie Louise's home:

What they saw was the section of land on which stood Marie Louise's cabin, undermined— broken away from the main body and gradually gliding into the water.... For a moment Hosmer lost his senses. He could but look, as if at some awful apparition that must soon pass from sight and leave him again in possession of his reason. The leaning house was half submerged when Fanny appeared at the door, like a figure in a dream; seeming a natural part of the awfulness of it. The two negroes uttered loud lamentations. (198)

David does regain his self-possession, and makes an apparently sincere attempt to rescue his wife:

...the detached section of earth swayed, lurched to one side—plunged to the other, and the whole mass was submerged—leaving the water above it in wild agitation.

A cry of horror went up from all the spectators— all but Hosmer. He cast aside his oar— threw off his coat and hat; worked an instant without avail at his wet clinging boots, and with a leap was in the water, swimming toward the spot where the cabin had gone down.... Detached pieces of timber from the ruined house were beginning to rise to the surface. Then something floating softly on the water: a woman's dress, but too far for him to reach it.

When Fanny appeared again, Hosmer was close beside her. His left arm was quickly thrown about her. She was insensible, and he remembered that it was best so, for had she been in possession of her reason, she might have struggled and impeded his movements. He held her fast— close to him and turned to regain the shore. Another horrified shriek went up from the occupants of the flat-boat not far away, and Hosmer knew no more— for a great plunging beam struck him full upon the forehead. (199-200)

Marie-Louise probably also dies in this accident, but as an African American woman, she is so marginalized in the narrative that we do not ever learn her fate, nor is, as far as we are told, any attempt made to rescue her.

Fanny does not fare much better, however. So eager is the narrator to rid the narrative of Fanny's inconvenient presence that she is all but written out of *At Fault* immediately after her drowning. In the aftermath of her slide into the river and of David's attempt to save her, Chopin mentions her only twice, both obliquely, though there are two

chapters remaining in the novel. First, after David is rescued after his own heroic but failed attempt to rescue his wife, we are told, “Another body lay beside him. Now they were lifting him. Thérèse’s face was somewhere— very near, he saw it dimly and that it was white— and he fell again into insensibility” (200). The body, of course, is Fanny’s. So immediately after her death, Fanny, by this time just a nameless “another body” is shunted aside for an image of Thérèse. We see this switching or replacement of Fanny’s image by Thérèse’s several times in the novel, usually when David has gotten Fanny out of the way for the moment. When he has put her to bed after a drunken scene, for example, the narrator reflects, “The last three hours had been like an acute physical pain, that was over for the moment, and that being over, left his mind free to return to the delicious consciousness, that he had needed to be reminded of, that Thérèse loved him after all” (127).

The only other mention of Fanny that occurs in the more than a dozen pages which serve to conclude the novel is again indirect, and occurs in the chapter which immediately follows Fanny’s death scene— a chapter rather unsympathetically titled “To Him Who Waits.” Thérèse thinks to herself,

The picture of that one terrible day of Fanny’s death, stood out in sharp prominent lines; a touch of the old agony always coming back as she had believed Hosmer dead too— lying so pale and bleeding before her. Then the parting which had held not so much of sorrow as of awe and bewilderment in it; when sick, wounded, and broken he had gone away at once with the dead body of his wife; when the two had clasped hands without words that dare be uttered. (203)

Here, then, Fanny is mentioned twice: once as a possessive adjective, and once as a “dead body.” She has all but disappeared from the novel. Her death is a convenient one for all of the other characters, and the significance of that death being a drowning should not be lost. After all, if the typical drowned woman (especially) in nineteenth-century fiction has misbehaved sexually, Fanny’s behavior while she is drinking is not much different. The novel frames her as a libertine, though one seduced by drink rather than by men. Because in this novel the sympathetic protagonists are David Hosmer and Thérèse Lafirme, rather than Fanny Hosmer herself, the narrator seems to encourage readers to share the happy lovers’ relief at Fanny’s death.

Some time later, the newly remarried David is reading his bride Thérèse a letter from his sister Melicent, who is living in St. Louis, and so has come to know some of Fanny’s former friends. Melicent recounts the downfall of Fanny’s compatriot Lou Dawson, who has been caught in a love affair by her husband. Her lover is shot and wounded, and her lover’s wife is emotionally and socially devastated. This information is revealed in the final chapter of the novel, a chapter in which Fanny is never mentioned at all. Fanny, however, is implicitly linked with the sexual misdeeds of her friends. After her death, she is certainly judged in the narration by the company she kept in life.

Thus, *At Fault* presents the reader with a more traditional drowning narrative, in which the drowning victim gets her just deserts for her moral failings. Fanny’s death is treated even more harshly than many other literary deaths by drowning, since the narrator does not even encourage the reader to pity Fanny. However, Chopin’s subsequent works which include drownings will show a progression from drowned woman as pathetic victim to drowned woman as arbiter of her own destiny.

“Desiree’s Baby”: A Sympathetic Portrayal of the Drowned Woman

Another of Chopin’s works featuring a drowning, the well-known short story “Desiree’s Baby,” published in 1893, shows a middle ground between the unsympathetic presentation of the drowned woman in *At Fault* and the arguably heroic treatment of the drowned woman in *The Awakening*. In “Désirée’s Baby,” Désirée, who was abandoned as a baby by some travellers and adopted by a local family, is a young wife and new mother. Chopin describes Désirée’s beauty and her temperament using glowing language, and writes of her supreme happiness in her new role as wife and mother. Désirée is indeed one of the angelic “mother-women” whom Chopin will describe in *The Awakening*.

When her baby is a few months old, Désirée’s overbearing, impulsive husband Armand sends her away after the realization “that the child is not white” (639) and that, therefore, Désirée herself must be of mixed ancestry. Désirée is so distraught at her husband’s rejection that she drowns herself and her son. The story, however, has a twist, Maupassant-style, at the end-- which is not surprising, since Maupassant was one of Chopin’s greatest influences during this phase of her literary career (Toth *Unveiling* 123). After Désirée has walked into the bayou carrying her infant son, Armand burns all of her possessions as well as the baby’s. Then, when sorting through some old letters in preparation for tossing them into the fire, he sees the letter from his French mother to his father that reads, “I thank the good God for having so arranged our lives that our dear Armand will never know that his mother, who adores him, belongs to the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery” (641).

In an article that breaks markedly and insightfully from the other criticism on this story, Margaret D. Bauer asserts that Armand is perfectly aware of his racial heritage, and

while we may be shocked to learn of Armand's mixed ancestry, Armand himself certainly is not. Bauer notes that if Armand was aware of his heritage, marrying Désirée, who did not know hers, was an opportunity for him to have children without risk of exposure: if the child looked black, he could blame Désirée, who was not in a position to dispute him. In Bauer's assessment, then, Armand is not merely cruel, but also scheming, and does not in fact fall suddenly in and out of love with Désirée, but sees her as a hope, then a failed hope, for providing him an heir. This makes Désirée's death by drowning all the more intriguing, since it becomes not so much a conscious choice on Désirée's part as a premeditated component of Armand's cruel scheme— Désirée's death becomes, in a sense, murder rather than suicide, if we accept that Armand specifically used tactics apt to drive her to her death.

The drowning scene itself is a brief interlude in a brief story. Cynthia Griffin Wolff finds that "Much of the effect of this tale derives from the understatement that Chopin employs to render Désirée's annihilation and Armand's inescapable, internal hell" ("Fiction" 41). Unlike the fairly explicit drowning scenes in Chopin's novels, in this story we are left to infer that drowning is actually Désirée's mode of death. Désirée's march from her home to the bayou where she drowns, in fact, merits four sentences, while her death scene receives only one oblique one: "She disappeared among the weeds and the willows that grew thick along the banks of the deep, sluggish bayou; and she did not come back again" (640). The narrator's description of her disappearance is romanticized, and it notably omits any mention of death.

With this story, then, Kate Chopin creates a fiction in which the drowned woman is a sympathetic, even a pathetic, figure. Désirée is an extreme representation of the wronged woman— a young bride sent away for a condition not hers, but her husband's. Also, of

course, Chopin is indicting the culture of racism that would permit a woman to be driven from her home based on her racial heritage-- this is a major advance from *At Fault*, in which African American characters primarily provide local color background and comic relief. In “*Désirée’s Baby*,” Chopin is setting the stage for her most famous fictional drowning, one which is as ambiguous and complex as *Désirée’s* is tragic and poignant.

The Awakening: A Transitional Drowning Novel

Unlike the protagonists of later works I will discuss, the heroine of Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier, does drown in the final scene of the novel. She is finally unable to transcend the difficulties caused by the clash between her temperament and the repressive society in which she lives. Although Edna is not, ultimately, a triumphant heroine, she is not a helpless victim, either. Edna’s drowning creates a precedent in American literature for a heroine whose encounter with water is self-determined, a precedent which will enable Edna’s literary followers to survive the waters which threaten them. Suzanne Wolkenfeld presents a useful summary of the many critical perspectives on Edna’s death. As Carol Christ notes, “*The Awakening* poses a challenge to critics because of its controversial ending. Is Edna Pontellier’s suicide the triumph of a strong woman who chooses to die rather than capitulate to the constricting social mores of her time? Or is it the defeat of a woman too little aware of herself, too weak to face disappointment in her romantic fantasies and to create a life for herself alone?” (27). In this section, I will explore what precipitates Edna’s suicide and how that suicide does and does not follow the literary conventions that surround a woman’s death by drowning.

As we have seen, drowning was often, in pre-twentieth-century literature, a punishment for a woman's sexual transgressions. And as Elaine Showalter has noted, "Drowning itself brings to mind metaphorical analogies between femininity and liquidity. As the female body is prone to wetness, blood, milk, tears, and amniotic fluid, so in drowning the woman is immersed in the feminine organic element. Drowning thus becomes the traditionally feminine literary death" ("Tradition" 186). Was Edna's drowning such a punishment? Or was it an enlightened choice by an enlightened heroine?

The Awakening is a transitional drowning narrative, meaning that it sets the stage for a generation of novels and short stories in which women involved in near-drownings survive and women are no longer punished for their sexual transgressions by drowning with the regularity that they once were. They are not required to pay for an illicit love with their deaths. Still, certainly, part of Edna's motivation for suicide is the loss of her relationship with her would-be lover, Robert.

Although Edna evinces no shame for her liaison with the rake Alcéé Arobin, nor for her unconsummated love for Robert, her death does evoke the traditional literary punishment for such a transgression. Edna is perhaps not as awakened as the title suggests, and it is wise to remember when contemplating the meaning of the title that *The Awakening* was not the novel's original title-- Chopin had called it *A Solitary Soul*, but her publisher apparently suggested the change of title (Toth *Unveiling* 197). The original title may more fully reflect Edna's life experience than does the title with which we are now familiar.

In any case, the repeated evocation of Robert in the final scene indicates the degree to which Edna's suicide stems from his rejecting her. She also recognizes the shallowness of the purely sensual relationship she has with Alcéé, and notes, "over and over to herself,"

“To-day it is Arobin; tomorrow it will be someone else. It makes no difference to me, it doesn't matter about Léonce Pontellier” (136). Her use of her husband's full name and Arobin's surname shows her emotional estrangement from these men.

Further, Edna's drowning reflects not only what Rachel Blau DuPlessis calls “the either/or choice between romance and vocation” (*Writing* 12) typically found in nineteenth century women's novels, but also features, in Edna's case, a sort of neither/nor choice. As I will show, Edna, almost outside of her own volition, has become a wife in a marriage without romance. So when she sees the alternative possibilities— Adèle Ratignolle, a woman truly happy in her marriage and with her role as mother, or Mademoiselle Reisz, a woman truly devoted to her artistic vocation— she also becomes slowly aware that these possibilities are not open for her. Since she has made her choice, a marriage to a man she does not love, she initially believes that “As the devoted wife of a man who worshiped her, she felt she would take her place with a certain dignity in the world of reality, closing the portals forever behind her upon the realm of romance and dreams” (37). She even feels that her marriage is more solid as a result of this lack of romantic love: “She grew fond of her husband, realizing with some unaccountable satisfaction that no trace of passion or excessive and fictitious warmth colored her affection, thereby threatening its dissolution” (37).

Edna's attitude is perhaps less surprising if we examine her family history; Edna's father advocates “Authority, coercion” and putting “your foot down” as “the only way to manage a wife” (91). But we are told that Edna's father “was perhaps unaware that he had coerced his own wife into her grave” (92). Her parents' relationship is undoubtedly among the reasons that for several years Edna willingly accepts her marriage to Léonce. Although it eventually stifles her, her marital relation is evidently far gentler than that of her parents.

Edna is seemingly presented with options to her loveless marriage: a chance for romance with Robert, and a chance for a vocation with her art. But again, the choice is neither/nor. As a married woman in Creole culture who has chosen a social marriage rather than a love match, Edna cannot fully possess either the romance or the vocation.

Despite the comparative openness of Creole society, that society remains fundamentally oppressive to Edna. The opening chapter of the novel provides several hints that the society in which she lives is a repressive one. “A green and yellow parrot” (19) presented in the opening sentence reflects Edna’s own role. He is bright and colorful, while Edna is in several scenes depicted as physically attractive and well-dressed, but the parrot is caged, much as Edna is metaphorically caged and restrained by nineteenth-century culture. Further, the bird speaks a bit of French, a bit of Spanish, and “a language which nobody understood” (19).

Like the bird, Edna has difficulty communicating with those around her. She not only literally speaks a different language— she is a native Kentuckian, while all of her companions at Grand Isle are Creoles who frequently lapse into French, a language Edna speaks imperfectly— but she also has difficulty revealing her feelings and unburdening herself to others, a problem which may contribute to her suicide. Edna is frequently startled at the frankness of the Creoles; their willingness to talk about matters she considers quite personal, such as pregnancy, contrasts sharply with her own close-mouthed Presbyterian upbringing. Thus Edna’s connection to the bird: Cynthia Griffin Wolff notes, “The absolute discontinuity among the bird’s ‘discourse,’ its exotic plumage, and its feelings (whatever they may be) is even more significant to the larger themes of the novel than the fact that he is caged. Or perhaps this very disconnectedness (and the bird’s consequent isolation) defines

the cage” (3). His inability to be understood when he speaks one of his languages, which may be a real language, or may be a created bird-language of his own, is analogous to Edna’s experience with what Elaine Showalter terms “the wild zone”: while “all of male consciousness is within the circle of the dominant structure and thus accessible to or structured by language” (“Feminist Criticism” 262), there is a portion of female experience that is unknowable by women because it is unable to be articulated in male language. Edna experiences this “wild zone” perhaps more acutely than do most women because of the discord between her cultural upbringing and the Creole culture in which she lives.

The parrot’s presence in the opening scene may also foreshadow the final drowning scene. The parrot’s wings are no doubt clipped, rendering him flightless, and a similarly flightless bird, this time with a broken wing, plummets into the ocean as Edna is drowning. Despite his captivity, his inability to be understood, and, in all probability, his inability to fly, the parrot and his companion the mockingbird, another bird who is both a caged wild thing and an accomplished mimic, are not completely powerless. They, again like Edna, manage to drive Mr. Pontellier away through their passive-aggression and perceived inappropriateness: “The parrot and the mocking-bird were the property of Madame Lebrun, and they had the right to make all the noise they wished. Mr. Pontellier had the privilege of quitting their society when they ceased to be entertaining” (19).

Although readers meet both the parrot and Mr. Pontellier in the opening scene of the novel, it is not until several paragraphs later that Chopin introduces Edna Pontellier. Early in the novel, the narrator refers to her as “Mrs. Pontellier”; later, however, she is called “Edna,” as though she is an acquaintance with whom the reader has a growing friendship. In Edna’s introductory scene, she is in the company of Robert Lebrun, the young man who

each summer at Grand Isle chooses a woman, often a married one, as his constant, but platonic, companion. In the first scene with Robert and Edna, they are resting companionably after a foray into the Gulf. Even this early in the novel, Chopin plainly shows us Edna's distant relationship with her husband. She bathes in the ocean, as she does so many other things, without him. When Léonce does rejoin her, his first comment to her is critical and proprietary: "What folly! to bathe at such an hour in such heat!" exclaimed Mr. Pontellier.... "You are burnt beyond recognition," he added, looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage" (20-21). Via this scene, we can draw a quick but complete picture of Edna's relationship with Léonce: she is one of his investments, or perhaps one of his gambles.

In these first few chapters of the novel, Chopin provides readers with ample material to analyze Edna's relationship with Léonce. Even compared to the casual attitudes of the Creoles at Grand Isle, Edna is remarkably unconcerned with his activities. Although he explicitly commodifies her, he simultaneously provides for her a large measure of freedom, at least superficially. Although it is quite possible that his frequent returns to the city and evenings out at Klein's include extramarital sexual activity, none of this disturbs Edna as long as she has the freedom to indulge her interests, including spending time with Robert, an interest which does not perturb her husband. He seems to recognize what Edna does not—Robert's inability to develop any of his attachments beyond summer flirtation. Further, Edna is freed from the day-to-day burden of care for the children by the presence of their "quadroon nurse," whose salary is paid with Léonce's money.

The price that Edna pays for these freedoms is high, however. Upon his late-evening return from Klein's at the beginning of the third chapter, the practical consequences

of Léonce's objectification of his wife become evident. First, he awakens her, although she had been "fast asleep" (23). Then, he regales her with "anecdotes and bits of news and gossip" from his outing (23). Although Cynthia Griffin Wolff finds that "it is *Edna's* unapproachable manner that disrupts the harmony of the moment" (10), it is in fact Léonce's inconsiderateness that does so. Edna is "overcome with sleep" (23) and not in a position to appreciate her husband's chattiness. Léonce, however, "thought it very discouraging that his wife, who was the sole object of his existence, evinced so little interest in things which concerned him, and valued so little his conversation" (23). This passage simply oozes with irony. While Léonce undoubtedly cares for his wife more than she for him, she is certainly not the "sole object of his existence." Indeed, Edna's world is circumscribed by her limited roles: wife, mother, and friend. Léonce, of course, has a career, is apart from his wife much of the time, and takes advantage of opportunities to go out alone even during his weekend visits to Grand Isle.

Although often thoughtful, on this occasion Léonce breaks his word to his little boys: he "had forgotten the bonbons and peanuts" he had promised. The narrator's comment that "Notwithstanding he loved them very much" (23) may or may not be taken at face value. In this scene, he uses the children as a means to his own ends, objectifying them much as he does his wife. He uses the (false) information that one of the boys is ill as a rationale for forcing his wife from her bed, apparently to punish her for not being more attentive to him. Wolff notes, interestingly, that this scene may represent another example of the conflation of motherhood and sexuality that we see throughout the novel, especially in the character of Adèle (10-11). Wolff argues that Léonce wants sex with his wife, and when she proves unwilling (or perhaps just sleepy), he uses the allegation of Raoul's fever as

an opportunity to chastise Edna about her “habitual neglect of the children” (24), really meaning her neglect of their sexual relationship. More interesting than the question of Léonce’s motivation, though, is his complete disregard for Edna’s needs: after he smokes his cigar (a phallic display), “in half a minute he was fast asleep,” but Edna “was by that time thoroughly awake” (24). Unlike Léonce, Edna does not experience disappointment that her spouse is not also awake.

She does, however, begin to cry, but “She could not have told why she was crying. Such experiences as the foregoing [Léonce’s inconsiderateness] were not uncommon in her married life. They seemed never before to have weighed much against the abundance of her husband’s kindness and a uniform devotion which had come to be tacit and self-understood” (25). This passage is the first hint that readers see of Edna’s dissatisfaction with her situation. In the next paragraph, in fact, we see Edna falling victim to “An indescribable oppression” (25). The narrator tells us that this “mood” is “strange and unfamiliar” to Edna (25). But the sense of oppression that apparently begins during this scene is one of the contributors to her eventual suicide.

The narrator is quick to point out the positive features of Léonce’s character, seeming to act as his advocate. Immediately following the description of Edna’s crying spell, we learn that “Mr. Pontellier gave his wife half of the money he had brought away from Klein’s hotel the evening before” (25). Further, when Léonce returns to New Orleans for the workweek, he sends Edna a box full of the finest foods, including the bonbons that he had previously forgotten to bring to his sons. The narrator remarks that Edna “was always very generous with the contents of such a box; she was quite used to receiving them when away from home” (25). And her friends, sharing her bounty “all declared that Mr. Pontellier

was the best husband in the world. Mrs. Pontiller was forced to admit that she knew of none better” (26). There are at least two possible readings of this passage. First is the idea that Edna must admit that Léonce is a good husband, so her dissatisfaction is with the institution of marriage itself as it exists in the American South of the late nineteenth century. The second possible reading involves her husband as an individual: Edna would prefer to believe that there are better husbands, or that Léonce is a poor one, but in her realm of experience, she has met “none better.” This reading would help explain her desire to seek alternative male partners such as Alcéé and Robert later in the novel: Edna is seeking the something better that she has never experienced.

Prior to her marriage, Edna experiences three infatuations, to a cavalry officer of her father’s acquaintance, a young man engaged to someone else, and an actor whose picture she keeps on her desk. Although these infatuations demonstrate that Edna is capable of passion, her marriage in no way utilizes that capability. The narrator remarks:

Her marriage to Léonce Pontellier was purely an accident, in this respect resembling many other marriages which masquerade as the decrees of Fate. It was in the midst of her secret great passion [for the actor] that she met him. He fell in love, as men are in the habit of doing, and pressed his suit with an earnestness and an ardor which left nothing to be desired. He pleased her; his absolute devotion flattered her. She fancied there was a sympathy of thought and taste between them, in which fancy she was mistaken. (36-37)

The narrator, then, perceives men as more emotionally open than women (or at least than Edna), but rather shallow and impetuous, too: falling in love is merely a “habit” to them, a

habit which Edna perceives almost as a vice, since she is merely “pleased” and “flattered.” The narrator further notes, “She grew fond of her husband, realizing with some unaccountable satisfaction that no trace of passion or excessive and fictitious warmth colored her affection, thereby threatening its dissolution” (37). This passage demonstrates that Edna’s sexual awakening does not begin via her relationship with her husband. Though clearly the narrator’s voice here is ironic, it also appears to accurately reflect Edna’s state of mind at this point in the narrative.

Among the friends who share the bonbons Léonce sends is Adèle Ratignolle. Adèle is the quintessential “mother-woman.” The narrator describes these mother-women as those who “idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels” (26). She explicitly notes that Edna is not of this category. Although Chopin seems to endorse the cult of the mother-woman in some of her other works, such as “*Désirée’s Baby*,” here the narrative tone used to describe Adèle is gently mocking. In fact, some of the most comedic moments in *The Awakening* occur in the early exchanges between Edna and Adèle. When Adèle brings Edna a pattern for a winter night gown for her children, the narrator tells us, “Mrs. Pontellier’s mind was quite at rest concerning the present material needs of her children, and she could not see the use of anticipating and making winter night garments the subject of her summer meditations” (27). Adèle, in contrast, thinks of nothing but her children: “Madame Ratignolle had been married seven years. About every two years she had a baby. At that time she had three babies, and was beginning to think of a fourth one. She was always talking about her ‘condition.’ Her ‘condition’ was in no way apparent, and no

one would have known a thing about it but for her persistence in making it the subject of conversation” (27).

Adèle serves as a foil to Edna, surely. For here is a woman who would never dream of leaving her family, never hunger for intellectual or artistic accomplishment, and who would certainly never commit suicide. Adèle’s wishes for her life coincide neatly with society’s expectations for her. In her limited role, Adèle is the very picture of contentment. She is objectified by everyone, which seems to suit her exactly. Even Edna “liked to sit and gaze at her fair companion as she might look upon a faultless Madonna” (29), viewing her as a piece of art, a portrait of Mary: with respect and admiration, but as an object.

Adèle is also the consummate Creole woman, sensuous and open, in contrast to Edna, who “was not a woman given to confidences” (32). When Adèle asks Edna what she is thinking, Edna replies, “Let me see. I was really not conscious of thinking of anything; but perhaps I can retrace my thoughts” (34). Adèle replies, “I am not quite so exacting. I will let you off this time” (34). In this seemingly trivial interchange, we see the distinction between Adèle’s temperament and Edna’s. Edna’s mind is insistent, “exacting,” while Adèle’s is sensuous and languorous.

Likewise, Adèle’s relationship with her husband lies in stark contrast to Edna’s relationship with Léonce. Adèle and her husband appear to feel genuine romantic love for each other, albeit within the confines of a completely traditional marriage. In fact, the narrator observes, “The Ratignolles understood each other perfectly. If ever the fusion of two beings into one has been accomplished on this sphere it was surely in their union” (75). As Barbara Ewell notes, “Fulfilled by one another, the Ratignolles have submerged themselves in the roles society prescribes for intimacy: for women, that of wife and mother;

for men, that of attentive provider” (150). Adèle seems to be perfectly content in this role, and plays it perfectly. Additionally, Adèle’s frequent references to her pregnancies show her openness about sexual and reproductive matters, an openness that Edna finds shocking. Although Edna, with her “sensuous susceptibility to beauty” (32), finds Adèle physically attractive, she cannot understand the coyness with which Adèle refers to her pregnancies—for Edna, at least in the early stages of the novel, this acknowledgment of sexuality is more open than her heritage prepares her for; nevertheless, it forces her to think about her own sexuality in a way that prepares her for her transformation in the latter part of the novel.

Far from scorning Adèle for her conventionality, Edna admires her, and confides in her: “She had put her head down on Madame Ratignolle’s shoulder. She was flushed and felt intoxicated with the sound of her own voice and the unaccustomed taste of candor. It muddled her like wine, or like a first breath of freedom” (37). Despite Edna’s desire for emotional intimacy with Adèle, she cannot deny their fundamental difference. In a passage foreshadowing Edna’s death, she and Madame Ratignolle argue after Edna asserts that “she would never sacrifice herself for her children, or for anyone” (67). This troubles the mother-woman Madame Ratignolle, who could imagine nothing greater than giving her life for her children. Edna responds, “I would give my life for my children, but I wouldn’t give myself” (67). By this point, Edna values the autonomous self she possesses separate from the selves of her husband and children. This self has become the center of Edna’s universe, in opposition to the cultural values that would have her subsume any individuality in order to become the ideal mother and wife.

Although Adèle plays the piano, she is not an artist, but “was keeping up her music on account of the children, she said; because she and her husband both considered it a

means of brightening the home and making it attractive” (43). As in all else, she acts solely to benefit her family. On the other hand, Edna’s acquaintance Mademoiselle Reisz shows Edna through her own example what the life of a true artist is like for a woman. She is a pianist of considerable gifts, but has chosen her music instead of marriage and a family. In fact, she has accepted a life of near poverty in exchange for being true to her artistic self and living her life as she pleases. If Adèle represents one end of the continuum of women’s available roles Mademoiselle Reisz represents the opposite end. Her devotion to her art is as pure and absolute as Adèle’s devotion to her family, but Edna sees via these two women that art and family are mutually exclusive.

While each of these women represents one of Edna’s possible roles— the mother-woman or the artist— neither is a realistic choice for Edna. She lacks the character to be the absolutely devoted wife and mother and the talent to be the absolutely devoted artist. Each of these women, Mademoiselle Reisz and Madame Ragtnolle, defines herself by something exterior. Edna’s discovery is that she wants to be devoted to herself. She wants to explore her own personality, her own sexuality, and her own desires. She wants to free herself of the ablutions that both her friends make to the patriarchy— Adèle by making one baby after another, and Mademoiselle Reisz by devoting herself to interpretations of male-created art. Edna is not successful in her quest because there were simply not any options open to a woman who wished to be independent of her society’s strictures on women’s roles. Katherine Kearns observes about Edna’s dearth of options, “As if it is inevitable, Edna kills herself, but one must see that Chopin has driven her to it, a sacrifice to the seemingly irreconcilable imperatives of autonomy and maternity” (78).

One of the ways in which Edna seeks autonomy is by learning to swim. Significantly, it is Robert, rather than her husband, who encourages this freedom by teaching her. However, during one of her first solo swims, she overestimates her own strength, and is barely able to return to shore. Edna's first near-drowning experience is terrifying to her; the tone of this scene is quite unlike the peaceful tone of her actual drowning scene:

Once she turned and looked toward the shore, toward the people she had left there. She had not gone any great distance— that is, what would have been a great distance for an experienced swimmer. But to her unaccustomed vision the stretch of water behind her assumed the aspect of a barrier which her unaided strength would never be able to overcome. A quick vision of death smote her soul, and for a second of time appalled and enfeebled her senses. But by an effort she rallied her staggering faculties and managed to regain the land. (47)

This scene is not only a rehearsal of sorts for the actual drowning scene which occurs at the end of the novel, but it also acts as a metaphor for the first stage of Edna's transformation. She is not yet ready to leave people on shore— she must return to them, because she has not yet come “any great distance,” physically or psychologically.

In the scene following Edna's scare, she and her husband have another bedtime altercation which reveals another aspect of Edna's embryonic quest for autonomy. Edna has been out with Robert, and Léonce has been socializing separately. When her husband returns home, Edna suddenly realizes that she need not bend herself to his will. He asks her to leave the hammock in which she is reclining and come into the house, and she refuses. The narrator notes, “Another time she would have gone in at his request. She would,

through habit, have yielded to his desire; not with any sense of submission or obedience to his compelling wishes, but unthinkingly..." (50). About Edna, the narrator observes, "She perceived that her will had blazed up, stubborn and resistant. She could not at that moment have done other than denied and resisted. She wondered if her husband had ever spoken to her like that before, and if she had submitted to his command. Of course she had; she remembered that she had. But she could not realize why or how she could have yielded, feeling as she then did" (50).

Edna and her husband have a standoff in which she refuses to leave her hammock and he refuses to go to bed without her. They remain outdoors almost until dawn, he smoking cigars and drinking wine, she lying in her hammock. Edna suddenly recognizes that she is dissatisfied, but has options other than automatically acceding to her husband's demands, although the narrator presents her, interestingly, as being without volition even in her rebellion-- Edna has not developed even the partial self-determination that she will acquire by the end of the novel. She also has realized the dawn of her romantic attachment to Robert, since just before he leaves her side, the narrator comments of Edna and Robert's silence, "No multitude of words could have been more significant than those moments of silence, or more pregnant with the first-felt throbbings of desire" (49).

Later, after she and Robert have spent an entire day together, Edna "tried to discover wherein this summer had been different from any and every other summer of her life. She could only realize that she herself-- her present self-- was in some way different from the other self. That she was seeing with different eyes and making the acquaintance of new conditions in herself that colored and changed her environment, she did not yet suspect" (59). This passage, especially the narrator's commentary, indicates that Edna has

already, at least subconsciously, experienced a social and sexual epiphany. And that epiphany is, as the narrative passage suggests, closely intertwined with her growing attachment to Robert.

A few days after Edna and Robert have had their day together, Robert abruptly decides to travel to Mexico. Perhaps he leaves because of his concern that Edna is taking his flirtation too seriously, or because he recognizes the inappropriateness of his own attachment to her. Immediately after Robert's departure, after Edna "recognized anew the symptoms of infatuation which she had felt incipiently as a child, as a girl in her earliest teens, and later as a young woman" (64), the narrator notes that Edna had "the biting conviction...that she had been denied that which her impassioned, newly awakened being demanded" (65). Her attachment to Robert, then, is of a kind with the adolescent crushes she experienced before her marriage. The narrator later observes, "Robert's going had some way taken the brightness, the color, the meaning out of everything...her whole existence was dulled" (65). Regardless of whether the emotion Edna feels is love or infatuation, a distinction which appears to be important to the narrator, Edna is attracted to someone other than her husband. At this point, Edna surely has the understanding that her marriage, which she has undertaken without love or passion, was a regrettable choice.

Shortly after the summer's end and the Pontelliers' return to New Orleans, Edna commits her first act of rebellion. Instead of performing her social duty by remaining home on her reception day, she goes out, to the considerable dismay of her husband. Léonce obviously feels that maintaining her social day is part of her duty as a wife-- his job is to do business; her job is to maintain social contacts. Edna's rejection of this duty is the first of many decisions she makes as she moves along the path of increasing resistance to

restrictions on her activities, a path that eventually leads to her death by drowning. At this point in the narrative, Edna vacillates between rebelling against Léonce's wishes and acquiescing to them. Léonce tells Edna that if she must miss her reception day, she should leave an excuse, and indeed, that evening Edna goes to her room only after instructing a servant "to tell any other callers that she was indisposed" (72). She is thus observing the social conventions, just as her husband has requested, but is not greeting callers, contrary to his wishes.

Although Edna is beginning to realize the oppressive role in which she has been cast, a realization which might indicate her maturity and self-actualization, she nevertheless shows her residual immaturity during the scene in which she has a fit of pique at Léonce, tosses her wedding ring on the floor and tries to smash it with her shoe, and breaks a vase on the fireplace. This scene demonstrates what we will see throughout the novel: Edna never becomes truly self-actualized; even after she ostensibly gains self-awareness, she is still subject to juvenile episodes of self-pity and impulsiveness. The cultural forces that conspire to keep women such as Edna childlike succeed, and inhibit Edna from achieving full psychological adulthood. Therefore, Edna's adolescent infatuation with Robert becomes a major contributor to her suicide. Mary Jane Lupton acknowledges this connection when she writes of what she calls the "Dido syndrome," women who kill themselves for the love of a man. Of Edna, Lupton notes, "...it must be recognized that she in fact does drown, that she does commit suicide, and that her self-destruction is partly a response to being rejected by Robert, whom she loves" ("Women" 97).

Soon, all symbols of domesticity become unpleasant for Edna: "She felt no interest in anything about her. The street, the children, the fruit vender, the flowers growing there

under her eyes, were all part and parcel of an alien world which had suddenly become antagonistic” (73). Each of these “parts of an alien world” has some relationship to the domestic sphere, so it is appropriate that they should “become antagonistic” as she rebels against her domestic role. The street described in the passage is a residential one, with her home upon it, a home which is enviable in its grandeur, but to Edna it represents only her own imprisonment within it. The children are her own, and represent the cultural and biological imperatives which insist that bearing and raising children should be Edna’s primary concern. The fruit vender signifies the traditional wifely concern with food and feeding the family, while the flowers represent gardening and making the home attractive (a chief concern of Madame Ratignolle’s but not of Edna’s).

Further, at the same time that Edna is beginning to reject her societally mandated domesticity, she also begins viewing her art with a more critical eye: “Edna spent an hour or two looking over some of her old sketches. She could see their shortcomings and defects, which were glaring in her eyes” (73). She is becoming a more serious artist here, as she transitions from dilettantism to attempting an artistic career. Still, when she goes to visit Adèle, she is not immune to the mother-woman’s flattery. When Adèle offers profuse praise for Edna’s drawings, “Edna could not control a feeling which bordered on complacency at her friend’s praise” (75).

Edna’s newly awakened artistic passion is explicitly connected with her passion for Robert. We are told, “While Edna worked she sometimes sang low the little air” that Robert has sung for her many times (77). She closely associates this song with her love for Robert, a fact made clear by her agitation when Robert’s brother Victor begins singing the song at Edna’s dinner party (111), and when she sings the air while painting, “A subtle current of

desire passed through her body, weakening her hold upon the brushes and making her eyes burn” (77). For Edna, art is not the substitute for intimacy that it is for Mademoiselle Reisz; it is instead a component of her newfound sense of self and a corollary to her impossible desire for authentic intimacy with Robert. During this same period in her life, Edna learns the value of solitude: “She found it good to dream and to be alone and unmolested” (78). This conflict between her need for solitude and her need for intimacy is another of the impulses which drives her to her death.

Indeed, the artistic life is not presented very appealingly in *The Awakening*. Mademoiselle Reisz, who has sacrificed family, material comfort, and beauty in the quest for artistic fulfillment as a pianist, is characterized as witch-like: “Her laugh consisted of a contortion of the face and all the muscles of the body. She seemed strikingly homely.... She still wore the shabby lace and the artificial bunch of violets on her head” (82). Katherine Kearns notes about Mademoiselle Reisz, “The romantically conceived artist must be purged of all normality, and Reisz, because she is a woman and cannot therefore embody traditional aesthetic ideals must also be physically reduced. She is, thus, miniaturized, so small she has to be raised up with pillows, dried up so that she seems mummified” (81). If we consider the traditional triad of virgin, whore, and crone, there is no doubt Mademoiselle Reisz fulfills the role of crone. To complete the triptych, Adèle, despite her many children, is the eternal virgin-- her maternity maintains her purity, and Edna even casts her as a “faultless Madonna” (29). Edna, then, is the whore, the woman who flaunts societal conventions. But even Mademoiselle Reisz, characterized throughout the novel as a true artist, cannot escape the patriarchy. Rather than creating her own, original art, she interprets the music of male

composers; indeed, with the exception of the work of Clara Schumann, a nineteenth-century pianist would have had virtually no music of female composers to play.

Unlike Madame Ragtignolle, Mademoiselle Reisz certainly does not allow Edna to become complacent. She tells Edna that she has “pretensions,” and that to be an artist, a person must have “the courageous soul” that “dares and defies” (83). She feels Edna’s shoulder blades, to see whether her “wings are strong,” and says, ““The bird that would soar above a level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth”” (103). The bird with the broken wing plunging into the ocean at the moment that Edna prepares to swim to her own death suggests Mademoiselle Reisz’s words. Edna, like the bird whose wing is broken, lacks psychological as well as physical strength enough to keep herself from drowning.

While some of her literary descendants, such as Janie Woods, are able to have fully realized loving and sexual relationships with one man, Edna has one relationship divided among three men. She has all the elements of a perfect romantic relationship, the social, the romantic, and the sexual. Unfortunately, each of these elements is with a different man: her husband, who is the “good provider,” Robert, who loves her but is unwilling to consummate their relationship, and the rake Alcée Arobin, who provides Edna with an outlet for the sexual tension created by her love for Robert. It is clear from the text that Edna and Alcée do have a sexual affair, though Edna lacks any feeling for him. The narrator tells us, “Alcée Arobin was absolutely nothing to her. Yet his presence, his manners, the warmth of his glances, and above all the touch of his lips upon her hand had acted like a narcotic upon her” (98). Further, when he kisses her, “It was the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded. It was a flaming torch that kindled desire” (104).

However, that desire is probably unconsummated until after Edna's dinner party. Alcée escorts her home, then "did not say good night until she had become supple to his gentle, seductive entreaties" (114). Thus the chapter ends. The sex scene apparently takes place in the gap between this chapter and the one following.

However, it is Robert whom she loves, but his inability to understand her self-emanicipation, as well as his (evident) concern about making any type of romantic commitment, is clear from his parting note, which reads, "I love you. Good-by-- because I love you" (134). His concern about loving a married woman is not the only reason Robert leaves. When Edna speaks to him of her awakened state, saying, "I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose. If he were to say, 'Here, Robert, take her and be happy; she is yours,' I should laugh at you both," Robert's "face grew a little white" (129). He may be prepared to love a married woman, but he is not prepared to love a psychologically emancipated one: he is, in his own way, as much a product of the patriarchal culture as is Léonce.

All of these factors-- Edna's love for the unwilling Robert, her lack of love for her husband, the necessity of child-bearing for married women, and her inability to devote herself either to art or to self-- lead inexorably to Edna's suicide in the final scene of the novel. Critics argue about the point at which Edna makes her decision to swim to her death, and for good reason. In the penultimate scene of the novel, Edna has arrived at Grand Isle, where Robert's brother Victor and the flirtatious Mariequita are performing off-season repairs. In an ambiguous statement, her final spoken words, Edna says to Victor and Mariequita, "I hope you have fish for dinner...but don't do anything extra if you haven't" (135). Perhaps at this point Edna still plans on returning for dinner, or perhaps she is

deliberately attempting to mislead Victor and Mariequita. Perhaps, too, the “you” in her statement, rather than the “we” she might have used, refers not to what she hopes they will prepare for her, but what they will have for themselves. Victor certainly does not interpret Edna’s statement this way; instead, he immediately attempts to find a better cook to prepare dinner.

Then the final scene begins, in which Edna is the only human around. This solitude points us to one of the major themes of the text— as Edna discovers herself, she takes increasing pleasure in being alone. Edna walked down to the beach “rather mechanically,” and “She had done all the thinking that was necessary after Robert went away” (136). These lines seem to support the notion that Edna had planned her suicide before she ever went to Grand Isle. The reason, then, for her comments to Victor and Mariequita might be that she did not want them to spoil her plan; implying that she would be home for dinner would prevent them from suspecting that anything was amiss. Also, Edna, living in a Catholic society, had good reason to want her death to appear an accident. She surely would not have wanted her sons to grow up with the burden of being children of a suicide. It would be better that everyone think she just tried to swim farther than she was physically able.

The narrator tells us that the night before Edna drowns herself, “Despondency had come over her,” since she discovers that Robert is the only person “she wanted near her,” but that her desire to be with him would also fade (136). This acknowledgment of her own fundamental solitude— remember the original title of the novel, *A Solitary Soul*— is essential to her decision to commit suicide. Edna has had children who seem like “antagonists” whom she can only “elude” by means of her death (136). The fact that her culture and her situation absolutely can not accommodate her new self, coupled with her inability to accept

the discord between her desire for freedom and the burdens of family life, leads her to her decision.

In this final scene, we see a collapsed version of many of the events of the novel. As Edna approaches the beach, the narrator echoes a passage from early in the novel, a passage that appears just after Edna's initial sexual awakening to Robert: "The voice of the sea is seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude" (136). Marianne Hirsch notes about this passage's double appearance,

By means of this total circularity, the novel clearly suggests that Edna's discovery of the inner life can lead to only one ending in this society— her premature death. ...she clearly sees that the only possible plot for her would consist of endless repetition of frustration and passionless lovers. Death becomes an escape from female plot and the only possible culmination of woman's spiritual development. (44)

Subsequent literary characters will be able to achieve this "culmination" without actually having to drown, but death by drowning becomes an inevitable consequence for Edna.

The final scene of the novel includes numerous references, symbolic and literal, to earlier events in Edna's life. As Edna prepares for her suicidal swim, the "bird with a broken wing," foreshadowed at several points in the text, falls helplessly into the water. This bird symbolizes Edna's inability to take flight within the confines of Creole society. Further, Edna makes this swim naked, indicating the liberating nature of her final decision. She initially puts on her swimming outfit, but then, as she approaches the shore, "she cast the unpleasant, pricking garments from her and for the first time in her life she stood naked in the open air" (136).

The language the narrator uses as Edna begins her swim is reminiscent of that used to describe a pair of lovers, but with a menacing undertone. Although the narrator observes, “The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace,” she also notes that “the foamy wavelets curled up to her white feet, and coiled like serpents about her ankles” (136). These passages indicate both the fear that Edna might feel, anticipating her own death—perhaps not unlike the “Zero at the Bone” that Emily Dickinson describes when in the presence of a snake-- and the tactile, almost sexual pleasure that Edna experiences in the water.

As Edna tires, she reviews previous life experiences: “the blue-grass meadow,” a sea of sorts, “that she had traversed when a child,” which Susan J. Rosowski calls a return “to her childhood dreams of limitlessness” (54) and “Léonce and the children,” who “need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul” (137). She also thinks of Mademoiselle Reisz, who “would have laughed, perhaps sneered, if she knew” (137). Knew that Edna was committing suicide? Or knew that Edna lacked what was necessary to be an artist: not merely talent, but “The courageous soul that dares and defies” (137)? She further reflects on two others: Robert, who “would never understand,” and Doctor Mandelet, who “perhaps” “would have understood” (137). This passage is the only one in which Edna indicates any regret about her decision, for the narrator then notes, “but it was too late; the shore was far behind her, and her strength was gone” (137).

Finally, in the last paragraph of the novel, Edna has one moment of “terror” as she looks “into the distance” (137), which could be out to sea, behind her to the shore, or, metaphorically, ahead into death. Then, she experiences another review of life events: “Edna heard her father’s voice and her sister Margaret’s. She heard the barking of an old dog

that was chained to the sycamore tree. The spurs of the cavalry officer clanged as he walked across the porch. There was the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks filled the air” (137). Margaret and her father are earlier cast as disapproving of Edna’s behavior, as they surely would be disapproving now. The dog is yet another image of the frustration (barking) that comes from confinement (the chain). Like Edna, the dog can complain all he wishes, but has remained shackled until he has grown old, which is the fate Edna resists. The cavalry officer represents frustrated romance. The bees and pinks may simply be additional images from her childhood, or may reflect her literal experience of experiencing auditory and olfactory hallucinations as she drowns. The “musky odor” may also be a reminder of the odor of her sexual experiences. Placed within these passages of reminiscences about Edna’s life are two one-sentence paragraphs that remind the reader of Edna’s physical state: first, “Her arms and legs were growing tired,” and a paragraph later, “Exhaustion was pressing on her and overpowering her” (137).

Clearly, then, Edna’s decision to drown herself is influenced not only by the literary tradition that advocates drowning the sexually profligate woman, but also by her own sense that her awakened state is incompatible with any of the lifestyle choices open to her. As Judith Fryer observes, “Edna chooses to die because it is the one, the ultimate act of free will open to her through which she can elude those who would drag her down. In becoming one with the sea she is free” (257-58). Adèle’s life of the mother-woman is infeasible for a person of Edna’s temperament, and Edna lacks the love for her husband that makes such bondage a happy state for Adèle. Mademoiselle Reisz’s life of the solitary artist is no longer an option for Edna, either, since it is incompatible with marriage and motherhood. Further, were she to abandon her husband and children, she would be socially condemned, which

might render her art unsalable. Her life has become fragmented, and the fragments cannot be returned to a coherent whole— not in the culture of oppression in which she lives. So the only resolution is death by drowning.

CHAPTER 3

“‘LOVE IS LAK DE SEA. IT’S UH MOVIN’ THING”:
MARRIAGE, THE FLOOD, AND DEATH IN ZORA NEALE HURSTON’S
THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD

Zora Neale Hurston’s 1934 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* features a female protagonist who survives her potential drowning. While this novel has a typical drowning trope in which a woman finds sexual liberation, then confronts water out of control, in this version of the tale, Janie does not drown, but lives, at least for a while, to tell her story. Although Janie’s survival is a departure from earlier works, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* shares many features with its predecessors. In this novel, it is Janie’s husband Tea Cake rather than Janie herself who dies as an indirect result of the near-drowning incident, so the flood scene still represents a punishment for Janie’s sexual satisfaction in her marriage to Tea Cake. Further, Janie is rejected by her community for her marriage to the “unsuitable” Tea Cake.

As I will show, Pat Carr and Lou-Ann Crouthier believe that Janie herself has only a few days to live at the end of the novel; thus, although she does not drown, she may succumb to the flood indirectly. Nevertheless, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is an evolution from earlier works that feature drownings or near-drownings, since by the end of the novel Janie does achieve self-actualization and independence, and, unlike her literary precursors, does not need to die for these achievements. Further, she is able to achieve what Edna Pontellier could not: a truly satisfying, mutually loving marriage, albeit after enduring a pair

of unsatisfying ones. Claire Crabtree characterizes Janie's marriages and their corresponding communities as representing "increasingly wide circles of experience and opportunities for expressing personal choice" (57).

The importance of water and drowning to this novel is evident from the ocean imagery of the first paragraph: "Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by time. This is the life of men" (1). Further, in the opening of the first chapter, Hurston refers us to the drowning victims of the flood that occurs near the end of the novel; they are "the sodden and the bloated; the sudden dead, their eyes flung wide open in judgment" (1). Whether they are judging (themselves, the white power structure that put them in such a dangerous place, God Himself), as the syntax seems to suggest, or being judged (by God), or both, is unclear. But these drowning victims, with their naturalistic and gruesome appearance, are reminiscent of Hawthorne's dead Zenobia. Hurston does not romanticize death by drowning. She knows better than to characterize it as a beautiful death.

The novel further prepares us for a drowning (or in this case near-drowning) scene by showing readers Janie's sexual awakening, which, as I have shown, is the usual precursor to a woman's drowning. First, as an adolescent, Janie has a mystical sexual experience while lying on her back under a pear tree:

She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with

delight. So this was a marriage! She had been summoned to behold a revelation. Then Janie felt a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid. (11)

This scene is so integral to the text that Carla Kaplan asserts, “Reduced to its basic narrative components...*Their Eyes Were Watching God* is the story of a young woman in search of an orgasm” (99). Susan Edwards Meisenhelder remarks that “this metaphor for sexuality is one free of domination and active/passive polarities.... The sexual relationship imaged here, one between active equals, is not only one of sexual fulfillment and ‘delight’ but, as the metaphor of pollination implies, one of creativity and fecundity” (64). Alice Fannin observes about this scene that “Hurston, educated as an anthropologist, is no doubt quite deliberate in her use of the pear and other trees, knowing... that in primitive cultures pear trees and other fruit-bearing trees symbolize the sexuality/fertility of women, and also that trees in general symbolize simply the life force itself” (47). Thus, Janie’s sexual awakening seems to predict a future ripe with fulfilling possibilities. But Janie is an African American woman in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Such possibilities are in fact few and far between.

Immediately after Janie’s pear-tree epiphany, she encounters Johnny Taylor, whom she formerly considered “shiftless,” but “that was before the golden dust of pollen had beglamored his rags and her eyes” (11). When her grandmother, who is her guardian, sees Janie and Johnny exchanging a kiss, she immediately resolves to marry off the sixteen-year-old Janie. Yvonne Johnson aptly characterizes this scene as the end of Janie’s childhood (65). And so Janie becomes the bride of the aging farmer Logan Killicks, and so her illusions about marriage end. Janie’s grandmother, Nanny, cannot empathize with Janie’s

pear tree experience, and instead wants Janie to have “protection” (14), presumably from the predatory men of all races and classes that Nanny has encountered: the white slaveowner who impregnated Nanny, the black schoolteacher who raped Nanny’s daughter Leafy to produce Janie, and “shiftless” men such as Johnny Taylor. Claire Crabtree observes, “Nanny’s aspirations derive from a distrust of life, a distrust of men both white and Black, and a negative attitude toward Blackness and femininity” (61), while Nellie McKay notes that Nanny “encircles Janie with a love that ushers her into the prisonhouse of the male-identified woman, a condition that confines women from their own lives,” and adds that Nanny’s “ethic subscribes to the maintenance of male dominance over women’s lives” (59). Raising a daughter and a granddaughter has been satisfying for Nanny, but the sex necessary to create these descendants was violent and loveless. Any “lawful husband” (21), but especially marriage to someone with financial security, is a substantial achievement in Nanny’s worldview. Nanny demonstrates her valuation of security over love to Janie when she says, “‘If you don’t want him, you sho oughta. Heah you is wid the onliest organ in town, amongst colored folks, in yo’ parlor. Got a house bought and paid for and sixty acres uh land right on de big road’” (22).

However, Janie’s marriage to Logan Killicks is psychologically imprisoning. Janie visits her grandmother shortly after her marriage to ask why she does not yet love her husband. Nanny insists to Janie that love is overrated, asserting, “‘Dis love! Dat’s just whut’s got us uh pullin’ and a haulin’ and sweatin’ and doin’ from can’t see in de mornin’ till can’t see at night. Dat’s how come de ole folks say dat bein’ uh fool don’t kill nobody. It jus’ makes you sweat’” (22). Nonetheless, Nanny realizes that she has made a judgmental error in marrying Janie off against her will. After Janie returns home to her sixty acres, Nanny

“dwindled all the rest of the day as she worked,” then returns home to pray all night:

“Towards morning she muttered, ‘Lawd, you know mah heart. Ah done the best Ah could do. De rest is left to you.’ She scuffled up from her knees and fell heavily across the bed. A month later she was dead” (23). At the end of her life, Nanny appears to realize that love is, in fact, vital. After all, although she does not experience love for a man, she experiences deep love for her daughter and granddaughter. When Janie marries Logan, however, she is bereft of anyone to love.

Janie does not let the marriage Nanny arranged for her stop her from marrying again, though. When Logan Killicks decides to get a second mule so that Janie can help him plow the fields, she rebels. Crabtree finds that “Hurston justifies Janie’s abandonment of her first marriage, not on the grounds that Janie feels no love for Killicks” but because he plans to make her work the fields with him (57). It is important to recognize that the work itself is not what Janie objects to. Indeed, later in the novel, Janie works willingly alongside Tea Cake on the muck. Instead, it is Logan Killicks’ assertion of authority over Janie that causes her rebellion— and her defection.

When Joe Starks arrives on the scene, Janie does not immediately leave with him, because she recognizes that he will not fulfill all her pear-tree dreams: “Janie pulled back a long time because he did not represent sun-up and pollen and blooming trees, but he spoke for far horizon. He spoke for change and chance” (28). He also, of course, speaks of free choice. So Janie runs off with and marries Joe Starks, seemingly without concern that she is already married. Logan Killicks abruptly disappears from the narrative, as though once he is out of sight, he no longer exists.

Joe Starks not only does not fulfill Janie's pear-tree dreams, but also, like Logan Killicks, begins to exert increasing control and restrictions on Janie. Crabtree sees one benefit to Janie's marriage to Joe: that he "puts her in touch with the larger world" (57). But his dreams of control and power, of being Mayor Starks of the all-black town of Eatonville, are incompatible with Janie's wish for a satisfying marriage. When Joe asks Janie, "Well, honey, how yuh lak bein' Mrs. Mayor," Janie answers, "...it jus' looks lak it keeps us in some way we ain't natural wid one 'nother'" (43). Janie's pear-tree vision of a "natural" marriage is what she seeks throughout the novel. Joe wants to be "uh big voice" and to make "a big woman outa" Janie (43). Janie recognizes this goal as the doom of her second marriage: "A feeling of coldness and fear took hold of her. She felt far away from things and lonely" (44).

Joe places increasing restrictions on Janie's life, requiring her to "class off" from the other residents of Eatonville. Janie wants to participate in the stories told on the porch of Joe's store, for instance, "but Joe had forbidden her to indulge. He didn't want her talking after such trashy people" (50). Cheryl A. Wall points out, "Being forbidden to speak is a severe penalty in an oral culture. It short-circuits Janie's attempt to claim an identity of her own, robs her of the opportunity to negotiate respect from her peers. Barred from speaking to anyone but Joe, she loses the design to say anything at all" (91). Joe not only controls her voice, but attempts to control her appearance, also. He makes Janie wear a head-rag while she is working in the store, so that male customers cannot see her beautiful long hair. The male porch-sitters even comment on Joe's treatment of Janie: "She sho don't talk much. De way he rears and pitches in de store sometimes when she make uh mistake is sort of ungodly, but she don't seem to mind at all. Reckon they understand one 'nother'" (47). The porch sitters are mistaken, however. There is no understanding:

Time came when she fought back with her tongue as best she could, but it didn't do her any good. It just made Joe do more. He wanted her submission, and he'd keep on fighting until he felt he had it. So gradually, she pressed her teeth together and learned to hush. The spirit of the marriage left the bedroom and took to living in the parlor.... The bed was no longer a daisy-field for her and Joe to play in.... She wasn't petal-open anymore with him. (67)

When Joe slaps her repeatedly after she burns their dinner, she discovers that her pear-tree dream no longer exists in her relationship with Joe:

She had no more blossomy openings dusting pollen over her man, neither any glistening young fruit where the petals used to be. She found that she had a host of thoughts she had never expressed to him, and numerous emotions she had never let Jody know about. Things packed up and put away in parts of her heart where he could never find them. She was saving up feelings for some man she had never seen. She had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them. (68)

Janie obeys Joe's wishes for years, but when she finally defends herself from his verbal attacks, she destroys him. Joe publicly humiliates Janie by criticizing her ability to cut a plug of tobacco, saying, "'Don't stand dere rollin' yo' pop eyes at me wid yo' rump hangin' nearly to your knees'" (74). This is more than Janie can stand. She replies, "'Stop mixin' up mah doings wid mah looks, Jody'" (74). When Jody does not back down, Janie delivers the final blow: "'Humph! Talkin' about *me* lookin' old! When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life'" (75). Yvonne Johnson notes that in this scene Janie "stops the

'laughter at the expense of women' and transforms it into laughter at the expense of her husband, laughter at the expense of men" (49). She further observes, "This is certainly a reversal of an almost universal patriarchal historical and literary tradition, a reversal that transcends the boundaries of Janie's ethnic community, the subversion of a tradition..." (49). Although the price Joe pays is terrible, it is apparently necessary if Janie is to assert her freedom. Joe dies soon after, and at Joe's funeral, Janie realizes that she is now free to do as she pleases: "She sent her face to Joe's funeral, and herself went rollicking with the springtime across the world" (84-85). For Janie, doing as she pleases initially means "basking in freedom for the most part without the need for thought" (88). But Janie does marry again; while on the one hand the focus of the novel is on her eventual achievement of her "pear tree dreams," it is also true that Janie is quite dependent on having a man in her life. After her relationship with Joe sours, the narrator notes that Janie "was saving up feelings for some man she had never seen" (68). That man, of course, is Tea Cake, Janie's third husband.

Janie's third marriage is the one that has garnered the most critical attention and contention. While critics are generally in agreement that Janie's first two marriages were psychologically stultifying, there exists considerable disagreement about Janie's relationship with Tea Cake. Although she seems to find him sexually and psychologically liberating at first, he begins to exert increasing control, going so far as to beat her. Tea Cake is, however, the embodiment of Janie's pear-tree dreams: "She couldn't make him look just like any other man to her. He looked like the love thoughts of women. He could be a bee to a blossom— a pear tree blossom in the spring. He seemed to be crushing scent out of the world with his footsteps. Crushing aromatic herbs with every step he took. Spices hung about him. He

was a glance from God” (101-02). Finally, she has met a man who appeals to her for himself, not because he represents escape from something else.

Their relationship is sexually charged from the beginning, and seems to be a profoundly satisfying experience for Janie. After their first night together, “Janie awoke next morning by feeling Tea Cake almost kissing her breath away. Holding her and caressing her as if he feared she might escape his grasp and fly away” (103). But it is Tea Cake who, in Janie’s imagination, flies away. Janie lies in bed after Tea Cake leaves for his job: “After a long time of passive happiness, she got up and opened the window and let Tea Cake leap forth and mount to the sky on a wind. That was the beginning of things” (103).

However, shortly after Tea Cake and Janie’s marriage, after she has left her big house in Eatonville for a rented room in Jacksonville, Tea Cake commits his first betrayal of Janie. He takes the two hundred dollars she has pinned to her underclothes “just in case,” and does not return home until the next morning— returning without Janie’s money. The story “he talked and acted” is this:

He spied the money while he was tying his tie. He took it up and looked at it out of curiosity and put it in his pocket to count it while he was out to find some fish to fry. When he found out how much it was, he was excited and felt like letting folks know who he was....pretty soon he made up his mind to spend some of it. He never had had his hand on so much money before in his life, so he made up his mind to see how it felt to be a millionaire....he decided to give a big chicken and macaroni supper that night, free to all.

(117)

Although Janie does not question Tea Cake's version of events, there is no evidence that readers are to accept them at face value. As seen later, Tea Cake is a gambler, by his own claim "one uh de best gamblers God ever made" (119), so he may in fact have gambled Janie's money away. Even if his tale is true, he hosted a party without inviting or even telling his wife. His reasoning for not inviting Janie is his concern that she will not accept his acquaintances: "Dem wuzn't no high mucky mucks. Dem wuz railroad hands and dey womenfolks. You ain't usetuh folks lak dat and Ah wuz skeered you might git all mad and quit me for takin' you 'mongst 'em. But Ah wanted yuh wid me jus' de same" (118-19). Janie has never given him any reason for this belief, however, nor has he appeared especially concerned about their class difference previously. In fact, he seems supremely confident throughout his and Janie's courtship. (In contrast, Janie frequently asks for reassurance that their age difference is not troubling to Tea Cake, that he does not find her old and unattractive.)

Further, Tea Cake has a predilection to violence. In his quest to win Janie's money back, he gets in a knife fight with another player. Tea Cake is cut twice, but the other man's fate is apparently worse, if we are to accept Tea Cake's story: "He lost his razor tryin' tuh git loose from me. He wuz hollerin' for me to turn him loose, but baby, Ah turnt him every way *but* loose. Ah left him on the doorstep..." (121). Additionally, Tea Cake is almost as psychologically controlling as Joe Starks, and begins to exhibit this component of his personality within days of their marriage. While he does use part of his gambling winnings to pay Janie back, in his zeal to support her financially, he says, "Ah no need no assistance tuh help me feed mah woman. From now on, you gointuh eat whutever mah money can buy yuh and wear de same. When Ah ain't got nothin' you don't get nothin' " (122). He

seems willing to let Janie go hungry rather than let her help support them. Rather than reading this as a paean of love for Janie, one could certainly read it as Tea Cake's complete acceptance of the patriarchal paradigm that he should financially support "his woman," whether or not such support is logical. Cheryl A. Wall writes about Tea Cake's attitudes that "...strongly idealized character though he is, has had difficulty accepting Janie's full participation in their life together. Zora Hurston knew that Tea Cake, a son of the folk culture, would have inherited its negative attitudes toward women" (93).

Nonetheless, Janie appears content within this marriage. After Tea Cake falls asleep exhausted after gambling all night, "Janie looked down on him and felt a self-crushing love. So her soul crawled out from its hiding place" (122). Tea Cake does help Janie learn new skills, from playing checkers to telling stories to (significantly) shooting a rifle. Janie's self-confidence increases as she discovers her talents, especially for marksmanship: "She got to be a better shot than Tea Cake" (125). So not only does she have a new skill, but also, she is able to be more skillful than Tea Cake without feeling that she must hide her talent, as she often did in her marriage to Joe—her talent for public speaking, when she is finally able to use it, surprises the residents of Eatonville, because Joe had silenced her for so many years. But just as she indirectly kills Joe when she finds her voice, Janie uses her new talent for shooting to kill Tea Cake, this time directly.

Although the narrator clearly expects readers to view Tea Cake favorably, on close reading, we must see that Janie and Tea Cake experience significant strain in their marriage. Not only does Tea Cake take Janie's money, but while working in the fields in the Everglades he also encourages the advances of another woman, Nunkie. Janie literally runs Nunkie off. While many critics have discussed the scene in which Tea Cake beats Janie, few

have discussed the scene in which Janie, angry about the flirtation, confronts Tea Cake: “It wasn’t long before Tea Cake found her there [in their cabin] and tried to talk. She cut him short with a blow and they fought from one room to the other, Janie trying to beat him, and Tea Cake kept holding her wrists and wherever he could to keep her from going too far” (131). Thus, the violence in Janie and Tea Cake’s relationship is not one-way; if Janie accepts receiving violence as a normal part of marriage, she also believes that it is her right to administer it.

Even the metaphors Janie uses to describe her emotional distress are violent: “‘You done hurt mah heart, now you come wid uh lie tuh bruise mah ears!’” (131). Their fight ends in reconciliation, and when Janie asks Tea Cake about Nunkie, he replies that “‘She ain’t good for nothin’.... You’s something tuh make uh man forgit tuh git old and forgit tuh die’” (132). This statement is interesting in view of Janie’s actual marital history: a first marriage to a man who is already old, a second who both gets old and dies while married to Janie, and of course Tea Cake himself, who does “forgit tuh git old,” but does not “forgit tuh die.”

Tea Cake is sufficiently enmeshed in his patriarchal culture that despite his admiration for Janie, he beats her, not because she has done anything wrong, but as a mechanism to establish control over his own emotions:

When Mrs. Turner’s brother came and she brought him over to be introduced, Tea Cake had a brainstorm. Before the week was over he had whipped Janie. Not because her behavior justified his jealousy, but it relieved that awful fear inside him. Being able to whip her reassured him in possession. No brutal beating at all. He just slapped her around a bit to

show he was boss. Everybody talked about it next day in the fields. It aroused a sort of envy in both men and women. The way he petted and pampered her as if those two or three face slaps had nearly killed her made the women see visions and the helpless way she hung on him made men dream dreams. (140)

This passage reveals much about Janie and Tea Cake's relationship, and also about what was normative for love relationships in the culture of the muck. Janie's self-chosen helplessness and passivity is considered desirable and attractive by the men, while the women, rather than reviling Tea Cake for hitting his wife, find him especially attractive because he shows Janie kindness after he slaps her.

While Tea Cake's violence toward Janie has garnered substantial critical attention, clearly his violence toward her is exceptional only because it occurs so rarely; violence against women is evidently a standard feature of marriage in Janie and Tea Cake's culture. Tea Cake's conduct is certainly not justifiable; nonetheless, a look at references to domestic violence in other portions of the text may be enlightening. When Janie goes to visit Nanny shortly after her marriage to Logan Killicks, Nanny notices that Janie seems upset, and first asks if she is pregnant. But her next assumption (also an incorrect one) is that Killicks must be beating Janie (23). In fact, Logan Killicks is the only one of Janie's husbands who never uses physical violence against her.

When Janie insults Joe in his store, in front of many onlookers, Joe "struck Janie with all his might and drove her from the store" (76). After Tea Cake beats Janie, he discusses the problem of Mrs. Turner with his male friends. One of them offers, as a solution to Tea Cake's worries, that Tea Cake should "Knock her [Mrs. Turner's] teeth

down her throat” (141). Clearly, then, Tea Cake and Janie’s marriage occurs in a culture in which violence against women is a normal feature of relationships, without the stigma that it carries in contemporary American society. Mary Helen Washington points out what is perhaps the most disturbing feature of Janie’s beating, however: “The beating is seen entirely through the eyes of the male community, while Janie’s reaction is never given.... Janie is silent, so thoroughly repressed in this section that all that remains of her is what Tea Cake and the other men desire” (102). This voicelessness certainly disempowers Janie at a place in the narrative where her point of view is especially important. It highlights one of the crucial characteristics of battered women: their perception of loss of control. The entire novel is rather peculiar from a narrative perspective, because it is presented as a story Janie tells Pheoby, yet is in the third person, giving Janie less input throughout than if she were, in fact, telling her own story.

Despite Janie’s voicelessness in this critical scene, she is able to achieve a level of independence of which her literary foremothers, such as Edna Pontellier, could only have dreamed. Among the reasons for Janie’s enhanced independence is that Janie remains childless. The only reference to the possibility of Janie’s having children occurs just after her marriage to Logan Killicks, when Nanny exclaims, “Don’t tell me you got knocked up already” (21). Janie responds, “Ah’m all right dat way. Ah *know* ‘tain’t nothin’ dere” (21). It is as though pregnancy and the ensuing responsibility for young lives, the responsibility that Edna feels so burdened by, is not a threat for Janie, though we are never told why. The narrator indicates that she has an active sexual relationship with each of her three husbands, but is always “all right dat way.” Perhaps Janie is sterile or uses some kind of folk-medicine birth control, but in any case, the novel’s lack of commentary on Janie’s childlessness is in

itself notable. In this novel, unlike *The Awakening*, female sexuality is shown to be independent of pregnancy and childbearing, which is a rather revolutionary concept in an era without reliable family planning methods.

Indeed, childbearing is often viewed scornfully in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Mrs. Turner, the reprehensible, racist woman whom Janie meets on the muck, is characterized as “a milky sort of woman that belonged to child-bed” (133). Unlike *The Awakening*, which presents a largely positive image of “mother-women,” in Hurston’s novel, “belonging to child-bed” is far from a compliment. Mrs. Turner’s physical appearance is of a woman whose “shoulders rounded a little, and she must have been conscious of her pelvis because she kept it stuck out in front of her so she could always see it. Tea Cake made a lot of fun about Mrs. Turner’s shape behind her back. He claimed that she had been shaped up by a cow kicking her from behind. She was an ironing board with things throwed at it” (133-34). The ironing board image is similar to the one used to describe Joe when his illness first becomes apparent; Janie notices that he looks “Like bags hanging from an ironing board” (77). This image, then, represents Mrs. Turner’s weakness. Further, she has given birth to six children, but “wuzn’t lucky enough tuh raise but dat one” (135). Thus, fecundity in this novel is not associated with Madame Ratignolle’s sweetness and enthusiasm for her many healthy children, but with the death of most of Mrs. Turner’s children, as well as with her anti-black racism, meanness, and weakness, and with Nanny and her daughter Leafy’s desperation.

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, then, we see many revolutionary features: a female protagonist who can have a lively sex life without bearing children, who insists upon her husband’s fidelity, and who manages to discover her own voice and her own talents. So

when confronted with an experience in which her literary forebears would have drowned, Janie's strength enables her to survive, at least for a while. However, as we will see, she is still reliant on her man to save her life; she is incapable of saving herself.

Readers are better prepared for the near-drowning scene in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* than they are for the drowning and near drowning scenes in the other works discussed here. In fact, the near-drowning scene is somewhat anti-climactic, following as it does the lengthy and dramatic storm scene. The storm scene itself arrives gradually. First, Tea Cake, Janie, and their friends notice a group of Seminoles heading for higher ground; then they observe a variety of animals, from rabbits to snakes, hurrying by. However, they choose to ignore these signs, which shows their fatal dissociation from nature. Instead, they rely on the "signs" from the materialistic white dominant culture to tell them what action to take. Although it might be expected that Tea Cake, because he works the land, would be more in tune with nature than was, for instance, Joe Starks, Tea Cake is incapable of listening to or trusting his own instincts. When the Bahamians, who are presented as having closer ties to the natural world than do the Americans, begin to leave, one asks Tea Cake if he and Janie want to accompany them. Tea Cake responds, "'You ain't seen the bossman go up, is yuh? Well all right now. Man, the money's too good on the muck. It's liable tuh fair off by tuh-morrer. Ah wouldn't leave if Ah wuz you'" (148). Of course, the weather does not "fair off." Anna Lillios notes that the storm in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is based on an actual category four hurricane in 1928 that killed 1,810 people, three-fourths of them black (90).

Tea Cake allies himself with those who desire material wealth and who trust the white man's knowledge; his values may not be as different from Joe Starks's as they initially appear. The narrator notes, "The folks let the people do the thinking. If the castles thought

themselves secure, the cabins needn't worry" (150), and, ascribing even power over the weather to the white man, the workers even speculate that "The bossman might have the thing stopped before morning anyway" (150). Some critics have missed this element of Tea Cake's character; Claire Crabtree even goes so far as to assert that Tea Cake represents "Removal from the world of material possessions" and that he is "unhampered by the orientation toward white values which is the flaw of characters like Starks, Nanny, and Mrs. Turner" (60). Lillios observes, aptly, that "Just as Janie is forced to deny nature's urging when she kisses Johnny Taylor after spending the day under a pear tree, she once again is talked into ignoring warnings from nature" (90). While it is true that his concern with white culture is more subtle than that of these other characters, it is still present in his character. And how can it not be? The non-dominant culture is always far more aware of the dominant culture than the other way around. Erik D. Curren finds that "The problem with Tea Cake and the rest of the American bean pickers is that they have been influenced by white culture in ways that they do not realize" (20). Rachel Blau DuPlessis further comments on this scene, noting, "Janie does not leave...the muck because she...listens to and believes a loosely structured identification with whites and white values. The Seminole message is heard, but denigrated and denied...," which is "a gross misjudgment of natural and political powers" ("Power" 95).

Tea Cake's misjudgment leads to his decision to wait the storm out rather than leave. This error is the genesis of Janie's near-drowning and his own eventual death. When they do decide to leave, the storm is fiercer, and the going is difficult. Eventually, they must swim, but unlike Edna, Janie is no swimmer: "Then they had to swim a distance, and Janie could not hold up more than a few strokes at a time, so Tea Cake bore her up till finally they hit a

ridge.... His wind was gone. Janie was tired and limping, but she had not had to do that hard swimming in the turbulent waters, so Tea Cake was much worse off. But they couldn't stop.... The lake was coming " (155). Thus, the narrator shows us Tea Cake sacrificing himself for Janie. Soon, his sacrifice is complete. Janie finds a piece of tar-paper roofing and thinks to cover Tea Cake with it so he can rest. However, grabbing the roofing proves to be a mistake: "Immediately the wind lifted both of them [Janie and the roofing] and she saw herself sailing off the fill to the right, out and out over the lashing water. She screamed terribly and released the roofing which sailed away as she plunged downward into the water" (157). Tea Cake comes to her rescue: "He heard her and sprang up. Janie was trying to swim but fighting water too hard. He saw a cow swimming slowly toward the fill in an oblique line. A massive built dog was sitting on her shoulders and shivering and growling. The cow was approaching Janie. A few strokes would bring her there" (157).

Janie successfully grabs the cow's tail, and the cow continues swimming, but "thrashed a moment in terror. Thought she was being pulled down by a gator" (157). But the dog-passenger presents the principal obstacle in the near-drowning scene:

The dog stood up and growled like a lion, stiff-standing hackles, stiff muscles, teeth uncovered as he lashed up his fury for the charge. Tea Cake split the water like an otter, opening his knife as he dived. The dog raced down the back-bone of the cow to the attack and Janie screamed and slipped far back on the tail of the cow, just out of reach of the dog's angry jaws. He wanted to plunge in after her but dreaded the water, somehow. Tea Cake rose out of the water at the cow's rump and seized the dog by the neck. But he was a powerful dog and Tea Cake was over-tired. So he didn't kill the dog

with one stroke as he had intended. But the dog couldn't free himself either. They fought and somehow he managed to bite Tea Cake high up on his cheek-bone once. Then Tea Cake finished him and sent him to the bottom to stay there. The cow relieved of a great weight was landing on the fill with Janie before Tea Cake stroked in and crawled weakly upon the fill again.

(157)

This near-drowning scene contains several familiar features, including the presence of a man who saves or attempts to save the drowning woman. As in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, this man is often a husband (*At Fault*, "The Wide Net") or a man presented as a lover or mock-lover ("Moon Lake").

The presence of animals in Janie's near drowning scene is emblematic of Janie and Tea Cake's uneasy relationship with the natural world. We see two domesticated animals, a dog and a cow, bred to be cared for by humans, who are forced by the hurricane to fend for themselves. Their relationship-- the dog riding on the cow's back-- is itself cartoonish and unnatural. One of the animals, the dog, is the instrument of death for Tea Cake (and perhaps, ultimately, for Janie, too). The other, the cow, is the instrument of Janie's salvation. The cow is an explicitly feminine image, with her connection to fecundity and lactation. Lupton additionally observes that "The gator, the lion, and the otter are used metaphorically, their suggested presence heightening the feeling that the fight for survival is operating on an instinctual level" ("Zora" 51). She writes of Tea Cake's response to Janie's distress, "When he dives into the water to save Janie, Tea Cake is behaving not in the artificially chivalrous, 'citified' fashion that so irritated Janie in... Jody Starks, but rather on an instinctual level deeply rooted in the male's need to protect the female of the species. This protective urge

results in the male's death and the survival of the female" (52). However, the scene actually demonstrates yet further how divorced Janie and Tea Cake are from nature.

The presentation of the scene is such that while readers initially may interpret the dog's actions as malevolent, later it becomes clear that his behavior is caused by disease. Although Janie quite possibly would have died without the cow's assistance, the narrator does not present her as benevolent, but rather as a neutral or even unwilling savior. Further, although the narrator's attitude toward the cow is compassionate as she describes the cow's relief at reaching safety, Janie and Tea Cake show no gratitude toward or interest in the animal whatsoever, and she promptly disappears from the narrative after she performs her lifesaving task. This attitude is simply one more example of Tea Cake and Janie's acceptance of the white dominant culture, in which all other creatures not only exist for their use, but also have no useful information to impart. It is an extension of their decision to ignore the wild animals, the Indians, and the Bahamians who choose to seek shelter before the storm hits, instead preferring to heed the words of the "bossman" and the call of the money they could make if they stayed on the muck.

As he and Janie discuss the near-drowning incident, Tea Cake shows two intertwined threads of his character: his loving care for Janie and, simultaneously, his complete participation in the patriarchal culture. In recounting the story of killing the dog, Janie says, "Po' me, he'd tore me to pieces, if it wuzn't fuh you, honey," and Tea Cake responds, "You don't have tuh say, if it wuzn't fuh me, baby, cause Ah'm *beah*, and then Ah want yuh tuh know it's uh man heah" (159). This scene shows his concern for Janie, true, but also reinforces a message we see over and over in this novel: Janie needs a man. This is the narrator's position, Nanny's position, and Janie's as well, despite her enjoyment of singleness

after Joe Starks's death. Janie tells Tea Cake, "'You come 'long and made somethin' outa me'" (158), as if she perceives that she was nothing without Tea Cake.

This scene is also the one in which Tea Cake expresses his fateful unwillingness to have the dog bite seen to by a doctor; this, of course, is a decision which will lead to Tea Cake's death, and is, ironically, perhaps the only time Tea Cake refuses to place his trust in the white man. After a few weeks, Tea Cake begins to show symptoms of rabies. He is unable to drink water, and finds water at least as frightening as he did a few weeks before, during the hurricane. When Janie finally does call a doctor, he explains the situation: it is probably too late to help Tea Cake, and Janie must take care not to be bitten, or, significantly, "'you'll be in the same fix he's in'" (169). After the doctor's visit, Janie reflects on Tea Cake's illness. She thinks, "Well...that big old dawg with the hatred in his eyes had killed her after all. She wished she had slipped off that cow-tail and drowned then and there and been done. But to kill her through Tea Cake was too much to bear. Tea Cake, the son of the Evening Sun, had to die for loving her" (169).

Not only does Tea Cake die, but also he dies by Janie's hand. In his rabies-fueled delirium, he fires a pistol at Janie, and she shoots him with a rifle:

The pistol and the rifle rang out almost together. The pistol just enough after the rifle to seem its echo. Tea Cake crumpled as his bullet buried itself in the joist over Janie's head. Janie saw the look on his face and leaped forward as he crashed forward in her arms. She was trying to hover him as he closed his teeth in the flesh of her forearm. They came down heavily like that. Janie struggled to a sitting position and pried the dead Tea Cake's teeth from her arm. (175)

Although it is possible to read this scene simply as a terrible romantic tragedy, Susan Willis finds that this is Janie's opportunity to step "outside of the male-defined circuit of exchange her grandmother thrust her into with her first marriage" (127). In truth, the scene is neither a mere romantic tragedy nor an opportunity. It is the death of Joe Starks that in fact creates an opportunity for Janie to take control of her own life, but instead she chooses to remarry and give up that control. For Janie, self-actualization means the realization of her pear-tree dreams and the ability to tell her life-story, not perfect independence.

Janie is arrested, tried, and acquitted in Tea Cake's murder the same day that she shoots him. During the trial, Dr. Simmons, who treated Tea Cake, testifies that "he found Janie all bit in the arm," (177) confirming that Tea Cake has indeed wounded her. The trial is a peculiar scene in which Tea Cake's friends turn against Janie and white, middle-class women become her advocates:

The court set and Janie saw the judge who had put on a great robe to listen about her and Tea Cake. And twelve more white men had stopped whatever they were doing to listen and pass on what happened between Janie and Tea Cake Woods, and as to whether things were done right or not. That was funny too. Twelve strange men who didn't know a thing about people like Tea Cake and her were going to sit on the thing. Eight or ten white women had come to look at her too.... But they didn't seem too mad, Janie thought. It would be nice if she could make *them* know how it was instead of those menfolks. (176)

The irony here is that Janie's life is suddenly full of madness— the literal madness of her husband, the anger of his friends— and only the white women are without madness. They therefore, strangely, become Janie's compatriots.

The black men, however, have become Janie's enemies: "Then she saw all of the colored people standing up in the back of the courtroom.... They were all against her, she could see.... They were there with their tongues cocked and loaded, the only real weapon left to weak folks. The only killing tool they are allowed to use in the presence of white folks" (176). They do not have the actual gun that Janie had, and they are disempowered and emasculated by the mere presence of white people. But in an oral culture such as Janie's, the men's words retain substantial power.

Neither of these forces, the white women who wish to protect her nor the black men who wish to condemn her, understands Janie as a person. Nor does her lawyer, who characterizes her for the jury as "a poor broken creature, a devoted wife trapped by unfortunate circumstances who really in firing a rifle bullet into the heart of her late husband did a great act of mercy" (179).

After Janie is acquitted, Tea Cake's friends forgive her and come to his funeral "with shame and apology in their faces" (180). The judgment of the white, male jury is apparently enough to convince them-- they still accept the opinion of the dominant culture. Janie purchases a new guitar for Tea Cake, which she places in his coffin, and thinks "He would be thinking up new songs to play for her when she got there" (180). This is one of Janie's few expressions of traditional Christian belief; although conventional Christianity has not seemed particularly important to her prior to Tea Cake's death, here she seems to view the Christian heaven as her only consolation. She remains on the muck for "a few weeks" after

Tea Cake's death. Because of her exposure to rabies, this time frame is significant. It is about three and a half weeks from the time Tea Cake is exposed to the time he becomes ill. Certainly, Janie is bitten: Tea Cake "closed his teeth in the flesh of her forearm" and after he dies, Janie "pried the dead Tea Cake's teeth from her arm" (175). One veterinarian notes that the infection rate for someone bitten by a rabid animal (or person) is almost one hundred percent (Wuensche), but the incubation period varies depending on where on the body the infected person is bitten-- the closer to the brain, the briefer the incubation. Tea Cake was bitten on the face, Janie on the arm.

Therefore, she may have longer to live than Tea Cake did after his bite, but if Janie has not been treated for rabies, by the time she returns to Eatonville she still has, at most, only a few weeks to live. On the other hand, it is possible that we are to assume that since Dr. Simmons was aware of the bite, he has administered the serum. If so, it is curious that this detail is missing from the narrative. Pat Carr and Lou-Ann Crouthier discuss the issue of whether or not Janie receives the serum, and conclude, "Hurston is a careful and conscious writer, and since she deliberately omits any further mention of the rabies serum, we think it is safe to assume the shots were not administered" (55). They further assert that Janie knows her madness and death is imminent, which is why, at the end of the novel, she locks up her home before retiring to bed. Carr and Crouthier observe:

Whatever reason the critics offer for Tea Cake's death, they have all assumed that the book ends with Janie going on with her life as a stronger, wiser-- albeit lonelier-- widow. There is, however, ample evidence in the novel that Janie, at the end of the book, has only a few days to live, and that Hurston

was not establishing her as a liberated woman but was setting her up as a sacrificial offering to love and to the exacting God of the title. (51)

Regardless of Janie's fate, it is with her return to Eatonville that her sphere of influence grows. After Janie tells her story, Pheoby replies, "'Ah done grewed ten feet higher from jus' listenin' tuh you, Janie. Ah ain't satidfied wid mahself no mo'. Ah means tuh make Sam take me fishin' wid him after this'" (182-83). Although Pheoby would still be joining Sam in his traditionally male activity, she is at least forging the beginnings of a more equal partnership with her husband.

The ending of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* does appear to take a markedly different direction from any of the earlier works which include drowning women. The mere fact that Janie is alive after her near-drowning experience is remarkable enough. Additionally, however, as Mary Jane Lupton notes, "Literary love affairs seem to end in abandonment...or in death.... In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, however, the unheard of happens. Rather than sacrificing herself at the altar of love, Janie shoots the rabid Tea Cake to save her own life—instinctively, without premeditation" ("Zora" 49). Of course, as we have seen, she may not have saved her life for long. Further, there is evidence in the novel that Janie at least subconsciously premeditates Tea Cake's death: Janie plans to have her rifle nearby, and spins the barrel on Tea Cake's pistol so that it will snap before it fires. Even though Lupton's emphasis on Janie's survival and its significance may be incorrect, she is indeed correct that this novel is a departure from earlier fiction that also uses the drowning trope.

Critics other than Carr and Crouthier have noticed that the rabid Tea Cake bites Janie, so why are they the first to question the notion that Janie survives, and why has this essay rarely been cited in other publications about *Their Eyes Were Watching God*? Perhaps it is

because acceptance of the premise of this article requires a radical refiguring in the way critics have analyzed the novel. Clearly, a critic who accepts Carr and Crothier's thesis can no longer perceive *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as primarily a novel of survival. But Janie does survive, in a way. Even if she is doomed to die of rabies, she still achieves a psychic survival of which her literary predecessors can only dream. She has told her story and told it in such a way that at least one other person is inspired to change her life.

In some respects, Janie's return to Eatonville after Tea Cake's death is not a triumphant one, since the citizens of Eatonville respond with vitriol to Janie's return: "It was mass cruelty. A mood come alive" (2). Despite this rejection by her community, Janie maintains her sense of self, achieving far more successful psychological development than do the protagonists of the works discussed previously. We cannot escape the fact, however, that like the protagonists of earlier "drowning fiction," Janie is dependent on a man for her sense of self. It will be Hurston's literary descendents, as we will see, who are able to create a female protagonist who relies on her own inner strength rather than on a man for her survival.

Despite Janie's psychological dependence on Tea Cake, the narrator clearly wants to leave us with the impression that Janie has benefitted from their marriage. Although in the final scene of the novel she is still grieving for him, she also celebrates what he has meant to her:

...Tea Cake came prancing around her where she was and the song of the sigh flew out of the window and lit in the top of the pine trees. Tea Cake, with the sun for a shawl. Of course he wasn't dead. He could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking. The kiss of his memory

made pictures of love and light against the wall. Here was peace. She pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much of life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see. (183-84)

The novel opens with an image of ships, and closes with this image of a fishing net, an image both of gathering together and of trapping. These are additional water images which remind the reader not only of the hurricane and its significance to Janie, but also of the frequent juxtaposition of ocean imagery and Janie's desire to love. Here, though, she is "pulling in her horizon," contracting the scope of her world, as she nears the end of her life.

Thus, while the near-drowning scene in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is significant as a plot device to send Tea Cake to his death, it is also a twist on the traditional drowning scene. At this point in the evolution of drowning narratives, the female protagonist is still being punished for her sexuality, and still requires her man to rescue her. But unlike previous narratives, the protagonist is able to survive, at least long enough to relate her story. Further, Janie achieves satisfaction in her relationship with Tea Cake (however flawed that marriage is) and in her relationship with herself. These are achievements of which previous drowning-novel protagonists can only dream.

CHAPTER 4

SEX, THE BALANCE OF POWER, AND DROWNING IN EUDORA WELTY'S
"MOON LAKE" AND "THE WIDE NET"

Two of Eudora Welty's stories that include drowning themes are "The Wide Net" and "Moon Lake." These stories are seemingly disparate, but both pair drowning and sexual themes in ways that show them to be progressions from the drowning and near-drowning literature that precedes them. In "The Wide Net," a pregnant young wife pretends to drown herself in order to gain her husband's attention, while in "Moon Lake," a girl at the cusp of adolescence nearly drowns. While "The Wide Net" is certainly a comic story, it is far more than just a lark. It shows its readers how the near-drowning tradition can be adapted by a female character; in this case, Hazel uses it to gently manipulate her husband, preparing him for the responsibility of parenthood. "Moon Lake," in contrast, is a far darker story. While it too has superficial comic elements, it is in fact a brutal, violent tale of adolescent awakening.

"The Wide Net": A Comic Faked Drowning

Many critiques of Welty's 1942 story "The Wide Net" focus on the mythic and epic features of the story. These readings are vital to a complete understanding of the story; however, the tale also subverts the conventional drowning narrative. As the story begins, a young man, William Wallace, has been out all night with his buddies. He returns home to find his pregnant wife, Hazel, missing. Patricia Yaeger notes that although "The Wide Net"

opens with the line “William Wallace Jamieson’s wife Hazel was going to have a baby,” “Hazel’s body disappears from the story, and instead of her reproductive adventures the narrative focuses on her husband’s phallic escapades” (“Poetics” 281). These escapades begin with the note Hazel leaves for William Wallace, so she remains in control of the narrative even as she disappears from it: “After one look he was scared to read the exact words, and he crushed the whole thing up in his hand instantly, but what it had said was that she would not put up with him after that and was going to the river to drown herself” (169). William Wallace thinks, “Drown herself... But she’s in mortal fear of the water!” (169). This is, of course, a reasonable fear; she is newly married and pregnant, and as we have seen, the sexualized woman in literature is always at risk for death by drowning, although Hazel’s legitimate intra-marital sexuality protects her from real harm.

Despite the drama of the beginning of the story, though, it is fundamentally a comic narrative. There is no evidence, other than the note, that Hazel has drowned herself; unlike Zenobia, she has left no slipper on the bank of the river. So William Wallace and his friends must search for Hazel, but their search remains strangely festive, and as the search continues, the reader gradually realizes that none of the characters actually expects to find Hazel’s body. William Wallace notifies his drinking buddy, the aptly named Virgil, of his wife’s disappearance: “I’ve lost Hazel, she’s vanished, she went to drown herself.” Virgil replies, “Why, that ain’t like Hazel” (169). Although Virgil agrees to accompany his friend in his search, he does so seemingly with the expectation of providing companionship on a lark rather than comfort for a somber task.

The pair decide to drag the river with “the wide net,” which they must borrow from Doc, the town’s most educated and stentorian citizen, who insists upon accompanying them

on their adventure so that he can distribute advice at every turn. William Wallace accumulates several more male friends to help. In addition to Virgil and Doc, he acquires “some Malones, and the Doyles... and two little nigger boys”, Sam and Robbie Bell, who are brothers, as well as another pair of little boys, the “two little Rippen boys,” Grady and Brucie. Significantly, in view of William Wallace’s impending fatherhood, both sets of brothers are fatherless; the Rippen boys’ father ““drowned in the Pearl River”” (172-73), while Sam and Robbie Bell’s ““Pappy got struck by some bolts of lightnin”” (183). Although fathers are often absent or dead, then, their influence in the text is omnipresent. Further, the actual death of the Rippens’ father reminds the reader that, despite the men’s lighthearted approach to Hazel’s supposed drowning, the Pearl River is indeed a threat: people can and do drown in it. Yaeger observes that “This superfluity of Doyles and Rippens and Malones announces Welty’s glee about some woman’s reproductivity. And yet everyone who joins this group— with the exception of the African-American children— is identified by his patronym” (“Poetics” 282). Welty thus underscores the importance of paternity, which is the core of this story.

William Wallace and Virgil discuss why Hazel might have drowned herself. William Wallace concludes, ““I reckon she got lonesome”” (170). Virgil questions this, but does not again articulate his doubt that she has, in fact, drowned. William Wallace observes, ““You ought to see her pantry shelf, it looks like a hundred jars when you open the door. I don’t see how she could turn around and jump in the river”” (171). William Wallace seems to equate her domesticity with her life force, as if someone with Hazel’s passion for canning could never drown. He has a point; in most of the works discussed here (“Dèsirée’s Baby” is a notable exception), the drowned or nearly-drowned woman is not the conventional

mother-woman, content with family and home. Hazel, in contrast, seems (from the little we see of her) to be largely concerned with domestic matters: cooking, canning, and of course the birth of her baby six months hence.

Virgil, however, is convinced that her drowning is “a woman’s trick,” and he is right, though not in the way he imagines. William Wallace says, again, “I don’t see how she brought herself to jump” and Virgil responds, “Jumped backwards.... Didn’t look” (171). This not-looking is not, in fact, a feature of Hazel’s character, but of William Wallace’s. It is he who “didn’t look,” who cannot, through most of the story, resolve his childlike exuberance with the reality that he will soon be a father. Peter Schmidt notes that William Wallace, though married and expecting his first child, retains adolescent characteristics: “a boy’s short attention span, bursts of uncontrollable jumpiness, and distrust of girls” (135). He is having a hard time adjusting to married life, and especially to his wife’s pregnancy. She looks “as straight at nothing as she could, with her eyes glowing” when he enters the room (169). Schmidt notes of this phenomenon that William Wallace “envies her pregnancy because the baby seems all hers; he thinks she ought to act special only after it is born, when they can both share it. He is especially jealous of the glow in her eyes, because it is caused not when she is looking at him but when she is focusing on something he can’t see, perhaps inwards on the wonder of her own body and the prospect of having a child” (136).

Despite William Wallace’s relative immaturity, he is capable of surprising gentleness, demonstrating his ample potential to be a good husband and father. He catches a rabbit in his hands, and “acted as if he wanted to take it off to himself and hold it up and talk to it. He laid a palm against its pushing, beating heart” (172). He then sets the “little, old, brown rabbit,” which the men repeatedly refer to as a female, free (172). Clearly this bodes well for

his marriage. If William Wallace is able to become a grown man rather than an adolescent, he is capable of catching and holding Hazel again— and indeed, when the couple reunites at the end of the story, the narrator observes, “It was just as if he had chased her and captured her again” (188).

Throughout the story, though the men and boys industriously drag the river, they express doubt that they will recover Hazel. Doc says, “Of course I am not going on record to say so soon that *I* think she’s drowned,” (174) while Virgil asks William Wallace, mid-story, “Do you think she jumped?” (177), questioning his own earlier statement that Hazel jumped in backwards. This emerging doubt serves to undermine the seriousness of their task, and the reader quickly realizes that the focus of the men’s search is not on recovering Hazel’s body at all, but, at least for William Wallace, on making a personal, interior discovery.

Midway through the river dragging, William Wallace and his friends decide to have a fish fry. By this time, the men seem to have forgotten completely about their somber purpose (which is never in the foreground). As Linda Orr notes, “The guys forget whether what’s-her-name ever threw herself into the river or not” (123). Hazel has disappeared from the narrative, at least for a while. They build a fire and feast on some of the fish they have caught. In a celebration of his masculine sexuality and his procreativeness, William Wallace “took a big catfish and hooked it to his belt buckle and went up and down so that they all hollered, and the tears of laughter streaming down his cheeks made him put his hand up and the two days’ growth of beard began to jump out, bright red” (181). This dance celebrating the phallus apparently summons yet another phallic symbol, the “King of the Snakes,” who appears in the water “in an undulation loop after loop and hump after hump of a long dark

body, until there were a dozen rings of ripples, one behind the other, stretching all across the river, like a necklace” (181-82). Not only do the men portray the snake as a male “king,” but they also attribute male secondary sex characteristics to it: ““It has whiskers!’ a voice cried” (181). This thoroughly masculinized image, especially when paired with the reference to William Wallace’s beard in the previous paragraph, underscores the maleness of the river-dragging party, in contrast to the return to domesticity that William Wallace is seeking when he searches for Hazel. Patricia Yaeger writes about this scene that “In believing that his pregnant wife has drowned, in searching for Hazel at the bottom of the river and appropriating her gestational tasks, William Wallace is constructing a patriarchal counter-narrative, a workable story that will help him mediate his own anxieties about female fecundity” (“Poetics” 284).

After the fish fry, the men and boys experience a violent thunderstorm, which is yet another manifestation of the power of water and thus of femininity. They then return to the town of Dover with their huge catch of fish. The tone of the story shifts markedly upon their return to society. William Wallace now becomes almost frantic in his previously-forgotten desire to find his wife. When a crowd of townspeople inquire about buying the fish, William Wallace replies, ““Take ‘em free.... I don’t want no more of ‘em. I want my wife!”” (185). At this moment, Hazel’s mother emerges from her house, shouting ““What have you done with my child?”” (185). This scene helps William Wallace emerge from his male-centered experiences and return to his everyday life, where women, as well as men, wield control. Hazel’s mother has earlier been characterized as powerful: not only does she have no compunction about confronting William Wallace, but she also “eats like a man” (169); the reader can speculate that Hazel will develop her mother’s authority, since she is

characterized as “smart, too, for a girl” (170) and “the prettiest girl in Mississippi” (175).

Obviously, too, she is wily, as we see by her pretend-drowning escapade.

After giving away the fish, the men disperse, but not before Doc intones his opinion of the river-dragging. He judges it a success, and when William Wallace objects, ““We didn’t catch Hazel”” (185), Doc responds, ““Who says Hazel was to be caught?... She wasn’t in there. Girls don’t like the water– remember that. Girls don’t just haul off and go jumping in the river to get back at their husbands. They got other ways”” (186). It is interesting that Doc believes that women “don’t like the water,” which is in opposition to the identification with water that we see in later narratives with near-drownings. But Hazel proves herself to have used women’s “other ways.” As William Wallace leaves the company of men to return home, he is once again assimilated into the female world. He looks down a hill to see

the Sacred Harp Sing on the grounds of an old white church.... He stared away as if he saw it minutely, as if he could see a lady in white take a flowered cover off the organ, ...and start to pump and play.... He smiled faintly, as he would at his mother, and at Hazel, and at the singing women in his life, now all one young girl standing up to sing under the trees the oldest and longest ballads there were. (187)

Then, as he arrives home, “William Wallace saw to his surprise that it had not rained at all. But there, curved over the roof, was something he had never seen before as long as he could remember, a rainbow at night. In the light of the moon, which had risen again, it looked small and of gauzy material, like a lady’s summer dress, a faint veil through which the stars showed” (187). Hazel is so far removed from actually drowning that she has not even been dampened by the rain that had fallen near the river. However, she experiences the benefits

of the rain in the form of the (feminized) rainbow over their home, just as she is about to experience the benefits of William Wallace's search at no cost or danger to herself.

Predictably, when he enters his house, Hazel is there waiting for him. "She was not changed a bit" (187). She has prepared supper for them as though nothing has happened and reveals that she was hiding, watching her husband, when he arrived home from his revels that morning: "you could have put out your hand and touched me, I was so close" (188), much like the rabbit that William Wallace catches. But Hazel is wiler than the rabbit, and thus remains in control of the situation: "It was just as if he had chased her and captured her again. She lay smiling in the crook of his arm. It was the same as any other chase in the end" (188), and Hazel is hardly repentant. She says, "I will do it again if I get ready.... Next time will be different, too" (188). With her renewed control, "Then she was ready to go in.... He climbed to his feet too and stood beside her... trying to look where she looked. And after a few minutes she took him by the hand and led him into the house, smiling as if she were smiling down on him" (188). Michael Kreyling observes of this scene that "Welty has given Hazel the all-powerful smile, the all-knowing look. The divisions between male and female, couched in folkloric terms...are smoothed over. The procreative couple who retreat to their intimacy at the end of the story have found a way to make their differences complementary" (68-9).

While Kreyling's observation is certainly true, Welty goes even further. Hazel is initially disempowered by her husband's choosing to stay out all night. As a mother-to-be, she needs William Wallace to be a reliable partner. By leaving William Wallace the letter stating that she intends to drown herself, she is subverting the literary tradition of the drowned woman, using it as a tool to increase her power over her husband, to help him

realize the importance of his role. She is also creating her own drowning text-within-a-text via the letter. The female water, combined with the male snake and William Wallace's own dance celebrating his sexuality, enables him to see the interconnectedness of the masculine and the feminine, and return contentedly to his wife, who nevertheless is able to smile "down on him," not up to him. Remarkably, however, she is able to accomplish her goal, making her husband into a good father-prospect, without William Wallace feeling chastened or resentful. Instead, by the end of the story, he too is filled with a sense of his own procreative power.

"Moon Lake": A Brutal Near-Drowning

The 1949 story "Moon Lake" is part of the collection *The Golden Apples*, which features interrelated stories about the residents of the town of Morgana, Mississippi. Several critics have granted attention to the aura of emergent sexuality which permeates "Moon Lake." In fact, the sexual politics of the short story have created a minor critical controversy centering on Welty's treatment of patriarchal power and adolescent awakening in her story. However, a paucity of critical discussion exists about the power politics of the little girls in the story, and the relationship of these power politics to Easter's near-drowning. Easter, Nina, and Jinny Love, as well as the sole male camper, Loch, have sensual experiences which affirm their places in the universal sexual hierarchy. But they also discover their positions in the local hierarchy, positions which Welty will affirm when she includes some of the characters as adults in other stories in *The Golden Apples*.

In an essay which has engendered substantial critical controversy, Patricia Yaeger argues that "'Moon Lake' describes the ways in which these young women, barely aware of

their own sexuality, begin to adjust even before they can react against a male-dominated world” (“Case” 431). Yaeger asserts that the story has feminist content, though as Marilyn Arnold has noted, “Welty repeatedly and consistently refused to take even a moderate feminist position... Welty insisted that... Women’s Liberation is mostly ‘noisiness’ that she had ‘no idea’ what was meant by male chauvinism, and that her mother, let alone she herself, was ‘not at all’ oppressed” (50). Price Caldwell, who also argues against Yaeger’s assertions, finds that “the culture Eudora Welty describes [in ‘Moon Lake’] is matriarchal, not patriarchal, and ‘Moon Lake’ portrays young girls in the process of being socialized as women by women” (171). Rebecca Mark objects to Yaeger’s argument for a different reason; she finds that Yaeger’s argument is “ostensibly feminist” but “insists on a univocal victimization reading of a text whose metaphors and images call out for a multivocal reading” (109-10).

No matter what Welty’s own perspective on feminism may have been, the gendered social hierarchy within her story invites commentary. Since the story takes place at a summer camp, the society is a closed one, and primarily female, with Loch Morrison as the sole, but influential, representative of the male community, as we see in the first paragraph of the story:

From the beginning his martyred presence seriously affected them. They had a disquieting familiarity with it, hearing the spit of his despising that went into his bugle. At times they could hardly recognize what he thought he was playing. Loch Morrison, Boy Scout and Life Saver, was under the ordeal of a week’s camp on Moon Lake with girls. (342)

Although the story's main concern is ostensibly the young campers, half local orphans and half middle-class girls from Morgana, this first paragraph deals almost exclusively with Loch. The girls appear only as pronouns until the final prepositional phrase. And we continue to see elements of his young boy's hyper-masculine point of view— that the girls are to be avoided if possible, grudgingly endured if not— through most of the story. His perspective on femininity is underscored by the camp counselors, as well. We learn that “At the hours too hot for girls he used Moon Lake” (342). Even his swimming is sexualized and proprietary; he “uses” the lake, rather than just swimming in it. It is assumed by all the characters that there are times of day when the girls are too delicate to swim, but Loch is not.

Most of the girls, including all of the orphans— “None of them could or would swim, ever” (344)-- are unable to swim, wading and clutching a guide rope while in the water. In contrast, Mrs. Gruenwald, one of the counselors, is able to swim easily out into the middle of the lake. But perhaps because of Mrs. Gruenwald's competence, the other characters and even the narrator mistrust her, perceiving her as unfeminine, unmaternal, strangely progressive, and other-- not to mention a Yankee: “She had deserted them, no, she had never been with them.... It was said she believed in evolution” (345). Nina, one of the Morgana girls, sides against her own gender as she makes her way to the lake for the morning swim: “I hate this little parade of us girls, Nina thought, trotting fiercely in the center of it. It ruins the woods, all right” (343). Already, Nina is learning to dislike her own femaleness as she prepares to desire the masculine. The other girls seem to share her self-hatred, for although Loch rejects them, they appreciate his ability to play his phallic-symbol

bugle: “He played taps for them, invisibly then, and so beautifully they wept together, whole tentfuls some nights” (343).

In addition to his bugle-playing, he is relentlessly masculinized in other respects— a veritable caricature of phallocentrism. He watches the girls wade while leaning against a tree, “jacked up one-legged” (342). When he dives, “He went through the air rocking and jerking like an engine” (342). Even his bathing suit “stretched longer” as the week progressed (342). He is solitary, demonstrating a sort of “rugged individualism” in marked contrast to the group behavior of the girls: “He came and got his food and turned his back and ate it all alone like a dog and lived in a tent by himself... and dived alone when the lake was clear of girls. That way, he seemed to be able to bear it; that would be his life” (342-43). Nonetheless, he is not free from female influence; he is at the camp because “He had been roped into this by his mother” (342). Loch is closely connected to the lake not only via his superior swimming and diving skills, but also by his name: “loch” is the Scots word for “lake”; thus, he carries the feminine water-symbol with him always. And I will show that names and naming are especially important in “Moon Lake.”

Even landscape features are gendered in this story: Moon Lake itself, despite the feminine associations of its formal name, is rechristened as a male. Mrs. Gruenwald sings a variation on a World War I soldiers’ song each morning as the girls march toward the lake for their swim: “Good morning, Mr. Dip, Dip, Dip, with your water just as cold as ice” (343). The masculinized and martial lake then becomes a sexual predator. We see the seduction ritual: “they walked out of their kimonos and dropped them like petals of one big scattered flower on the bank behind them, and exposing themselves felt in a hundred places at once the little pangs” (344). After they go in the water, the sexual imagery continues:

“Gee, we think you’re mighty nice,” they sang to Mr. Dip, gasping, pounding their legs in him. If they let their feet go down, the invisible bottom of the lake felt like soft, knee-deep fur. The sharp hard knobs came up where least expected. The Morgana girls of course wore bathing slippers, and the mud loved to suck them off. (345)

The lake becomes a seducer, a rapist even, which begins to undress the girls. But even the lake is status-conscious, more attracted to the middle-class Morgana girls, who “of course” have bathing slippers for the mud to suck at, while the orphans must swim in their bare feet and underwear. Further, the bathing ritual is male-controlled: “they [the girls] had to keep waiting till Loch Morrison blew his horn before they could come out of Moon Lake” (345).

The differences between the groups of girls do not end with the disparity in their possessions. The names of the characters are another forum through which the girls achieve identity and status, yet they also serve to further separate the two groups. One of the orphan characters, Easter, claims to have named herself, but spells her name “Esther.” One of the other girls, Nina, tries to get her to correct the spelling of her name, telling her, “Spell it right and it’s real!” (357). But Easter has claimed her own identity, with its inconsistencies between the written and the spoken, and refuses to change. Jinny Love, the most conventional of the three central characters, tells the other girls, “I was named for my maternal grandmother, so my name’s Jinny Love. It couldn’t be anything else. Or anything better. You see? Easter’s just not a real name. It doesn’t matter how she spells it, Nina, nobody ever had it. Not around here” (357). So although Nina states that spelling Easter’s name correctly is enough to make it “real,” Jinny Love follows the convention that each person, and especially each woman, must take someone else’s name: as a surname, of course,

first the father's and then the husband's, but also, often, as a first name. Although we learn the family names of all the Morgana children, we never learn the orphan Easter's family name, and she reveals that although she remembers her mother giving her up, she never knew her father, the source, in this patriarchal culture, of any name and accompanying family identity she would have. Thus, Easter is free indeed to choose her own name. Peter Schmidt observes:

The difficulties that the girls discover in first names are difficulties that apply to all forms of naming; there is a permanent tension between our desire to be unique and that fact that (as Jinny Love says) we are conventionally named "for someone" else.... Easter's claim to having named herself is thus at least potentially the revolutionary claim to be able to keep her unique identity (however she spells its name) if she marries. (169-70)

The division between the fully-named Morgana girls and the partly or self-named orphans appears in other ways, as well. Predictably, the girls from town and the orphans, "wished on them by Mr. Nesbitt and the Men's Bible Class after Billy Sunday's visit to town" (342), separate themselves socially when they first arrive at camp, and the class-oriented Jinny Love even attempts to use the orphans as a sort of aquatic front line: "Let's let the orphans go in the water first and get the snakes stirred up, Mrs. Gruenwald," Jinny Love Stark suggested first off, in the cheerful voice she adopted toward grown people. "Then they'll be chased away by the time *we* go in" (344). However, the more open-minded and adventurous town girl Nina perceives Easter's qualities which transcend social status:

For the orphans, from the first, sniffed out the way to the spring by themselves, and they could get there without stops to hold up their feet and

pull out thorns and stickers, and could run through the sandy bottoms and never look down where they were going, and could grab hold with their toes on the sharp rutted path up the pine ridge and down.... What was it to them if the spring was muddied by the time Jinny Love Stark got there? (345-46)

Thus, the orphans are eventually able to obtain a certain degree of status through their accomplishments. These accomplishments primarily consist of feats not possible for the girls from Morgana because of what Price Caldwell calls their “programmatically prissification” (172). Easter is capable of many rough activities which have been “bred out” of the Morgana girls. Not only is she proficient at drinking out of the spring, but also she can play mumblety-peg with her own jackknife, that quintessentially Freudian symbol of maleness. However, the camp leaders take Easter’s jackknife away from her after Jinny Love tattles. This feminization indicates Easter’s increasing assimilation into the world of the Morgana girls. Nina, the most perceptive of the girls, seems to sense that the knife has more than a literal significance when she exclaims, ““Oh, Easter, Easter! I wish you still had your knife!”” (356). But Easter’s entry into the world of women has already begun; after all, “She had started her breasts” (347), so she must be prepared to join the world of women and forego her quasi-membership in the world of boys.

Although Easter has entered puberty first, Nina may not be far behind. Like Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Nina experiences an epiphany that takes the form of a pear-tree dream. At first, Easter’s head reminds her of a pear, and then

Again she thought of a pear— not the everyday gritty kind that hung on the tree in the backyard, but the fine kind sold on trains and at high prices, each pear with a paper cone wrapping it alone— beautiful, symmetrical, clean pears

with thin skins, with snow-white flesh so juicy and tender that to eat one baptized the whole face, and so delicate that while you urgently ate the first half, the second half was already beginning to turn brown. To all fruits, and especially to those fine pears, something happened— the process was so swift, you were never in time for them. It's not the flowers that are fleeting, Nina thought, it's the fruits— it's the time when things are ready that they don't stay. (356)

Carol Ann Johnston sees this as a retelling of the Adam and Eve story (93). While that story may be one of the undercurrents here, Adam really has no place in this portion of the narrative. Nina's realization exclusively concerns the nature of female sexuality, free of the impositions of men. Her awareness is more negative than Janie's, however, since her perception seems to be that women's beauty, sexuality, and maybe even happiness are fleeting once they become adults.

As we have seen earlier, Jinny Love has a keen awareness of class in all its subtlety. However, the hierarchy of Moon Lake is somewhat flexible. Easter is assimilated into the world of Morgana girls in part because she is the leader of the orphans: the highest status orphan can approach the ranks of the Morgana girls. But even then, Jinny Love holds no illusions that camp is the real world; if social distinctions can be breached here, they will stand firm once the camp week is over. Jinny Love, though she "dreamed and dreamed" of tattling on Easter again, this time for smoking "cross-vine," tells Easter, "'Even after all this is over, Easter, I'll always remember you'" (358). Never is there a promise to write, or a wish to meet again, though. For Jinny Love, the camp week will fit easily into the realm of memory, but will no longer be a part of her reality. She knows that Easter, for whom she

has some degree of admiration at camp, would be an embarrassment in her “outgrown, printed dress” (363) once they all return to town.

The girls’ camp does not end without a final crisis, however, a near-drowning scene which is prefigured by Nina, Jinny Love and Easter’s decision to “run away from basketweaving” one afternoon, and trek to the lake instead: “Then there was Moon Lake.... Here it was quiet, until, fatefully, there was one soft splash” (354). This splash turns out to be a snake (again, a symbol of the male sexuality associated with the lake), but of course the splash also prepares us for Easter’s accidental splash into Moon Lake later in the story. Easter finds an old rowboat, and assumes a similar pose to that she will later take while sleeping and also while being resuscitated; she “lay back with her toes hooked up. She looked falling over backwards. One arm lifted, curved over her head, and hung till her finger touched the water” (354). Even Loch, though absent physically, is remembered in this scene. Nina discovers that there are “minute shells” in the sand, “some shaped exactly like bugles” (354). Again, Welty chooses violent sexual imagery to describe the lake; the mud is “sucking” and “pulled at her toes” “like some awful kiss” (355). This foreshadows the “awful kiss” of rescue breathing that Loch will perform on Easter.

Although no male other than Loch is presented until late in the story, there is also a young African American boy, Exum, at Moon Lake. Exum is even more othered than Loch, because of his race as well as his gender: “Exum was apart too, boy and colored to boot; he constantly moved along an even further fringe of the landscape than Loch” (362). He is the catalyst for Easter’s near-drowning; he climbs up the diving board, where Easter (who, remember, cannot swim) is sitting. “He gave Easter’s heel the tenderest, obscurest little brush” with a willow switch, and “She dropped like one hit in the head by a stone from a

sling” (363). The narrative description of Easter’s falling objectifies her completely; she becomes an “it,” a body, rather than a person: “her body, never turning, seemed to languish upright for a moment, then descend. It went to meet and was received by blue air. It dropped as if handed down all the way and was let into the brown water... and went out of sight at once” (363). Easter’s fall is a metaphor for her fall from the comparative innocence of childhood into the sexualized adult world, a fall that is completed by the brutality of her rescue.

“Moon Lake” fits the pattern of drownings and near-drownings that we have seen so far in that Easter’s experience is linked with her sexual awakening, but it is also the most brutal of the drowning scenes discussed here, rivaling only Zenobia’s drowning in *The Blithedale Romance*. The entire scene is riddled with violent sexual imagery, beginning as soon as Loch, the designated life saver, pulls Easter out of the water: “They saw him snatch the hair of Easter’s head, the way a boy will snatch anything he wants.... Under the water he joined himself to her. He spouted, and with engine-like jerks brought her in” (364).

After returning to shore, Loch performs a metaphorical rape of the unconscious Easter: “Loch returned to Easter, spread her out” (364). Easter herself is completely passive and limp, unable to resist Loch’s ministrations, which are both lifesaving and sadistic: “She was arm to arm and leg to leg in a long fold, wrong-colored and pressed together as unopen leaves are. Her breasts, too, faced together. Out of the water Easter’s hair was darkened, and lay over her face in long fern shapes” (365). Her passivity is underscored by the plant images (“unopen leaves,” “fern shapes”), which remind us that Easter is a living being who, like a plant, is immobile and unable to resist. Then the life saving/“rape scene” begins in earnest: “Astride Easter the Boy Scout lifted her up between his legs and dropped her”

(365). His actions grow still more violent: “The Boy Scout reached in and gouged out her mouth with his hand, an unbelievable act,” and for the little girls, “Life-saving was much worse than they had dreamed” (366). Meanwhile, “Easter’s body lay up on the table to receive anything that was done to it” (366). But of course, Loch’s ministrations are necessary as well as brutal; nonetheless, when Miss Lizzie Stark, Jinny Love’s mother, arrives at camp, she looks on in horror at the scene and says, “Loch Morrison, get off that table and shame on you” (367). For Miss Lizzie, the scene of Loch reviving Easter is so dreadful that permitting Easter to die seems preferable. The epitome of conventionality, Miss Lizzie “was valiantly trying to make up for all the Boy Scout was doing by what she was thinking of him: that he was odious” (367). And Miss Lizzie does succeed in emasculating Loch, since “Under her gaze the Boy Scout’s actions seemed to lose a good deal of significance. He was reduced almost to a nuisance-- a mosquito, with a mosquito’s proboscis” (367).

Nina shows the most insight into the event, perceiving it as a kind of spiritual experience. Easter becomes a Christ figure, resurrected as surely as her name implies, but Jinny Love, as usual, attempts to take over Easter’s rightful role as Christ by assuming the position “on the right side,” fanning Easter and Loch with a towel, and, as Carol S. Manning writes, “symbolically becomes a servant to them” (109), or perhaps, rather than a servant, a disciple. Nina speculates, “Could it be owing to Jinny Love’s always being on the right side that Easter mustn’t dare die and bring this all to a stop?” (368). Rebecca Marks reads Loch, rather than Easter, as the Christ figure, who “circumscribes who the female can be and what she can achieve” (115). Easter, however, is the one who assumes the Christ-like role of leadership, while the other girls become her disciples. Nina, especially, is open to the salvation, the awakening, Easter offers. Nina recognizes the fragility of Easter’s leadership,

however, observing “Easter had come among them and had held herself untouchable and intact. Of course, for one little touch could smirch her, make her fall so far, so deep” (368). Loch’s touch, rather than Exum’s, is the touch precipitating her metaphorical fall; the other girls begin to tire of the life-saving, with “Easter abandoned on a little edifice, beyond dying and beyond being remembered about” (370), her leadership and importance become ephemeral indeed.

Nina, always more perceptive than the other girls, understands the sensuality as well as the cruelty of the lifesaving. Earlier, she has personified night as a male lover, perceiving it as “the pale dark roaring night with its secret step, the Indian night,” who approaches Easter, sleeping with her “hand hung down, opened outward” (361). When Nina perceives that Easter has assumed the same pose while Loch is reviving her, Nina faints in a sort of epiphany of adolescence.

Carol Siegel notes about this scene the concept that we have observed in each previously discussed work: that women experience a flux of liquids related to sexuality. They emit menstrual blood and breast milk, while taking in semen. Siegel writes: “Thus ‘flowing’ woman signifies the material world against which man defines his controlling, structuring, idealizing self. Because her flux is a reminder of mortality, she also represents the inner life of the body, the revelation of which is always disturbing” (113). Nina faints when she understands that what is happening to Easter will someday happen to her, as well.

Later, after Easter has recovered, Nina and Jinny Love come upon Loch undressing. Despite his performance earlier in the day, he is still pre-pubescent, with just “his little tickling thing hung on him like the last drop on the pitcher’s lip” (373). Nina and Jinny Love have had a sexual awakening, one which has been shocking to Nina, but this scene removes

much of the power Loch has held over the girls. Schmidt notes, “Like Loch’s, Nina’s interest in the opposite sex expresses itself obliquely rather than directly, as mockery and proud indifference, but she also makes fun of Loch because she has also newly discovered her own kind of sexuality and self-confidence, matching his” (171). Jinny Love returns to her old ways long enough to say, “I’ll tell on him in Morgana tomorrow. He’s the most conceited Boy Scout in the whole troop; and he’s bowlegged. You and I will always be old maids” (374). Of course, as the next story in the collection shows, and as we would expect, Jinny Love’s prediction is inaccurate: she marries Ran MacLain, the hunter who appears at the end of “Moon Lake.” Ran, accompanied by his chaotic mass of dogs, further masculinizes Moon Lake, and completes its transition from a women’s lunar, watery place to one dominated by masculine power.

Clearly, then, “Moon Lake” focuses not only on the dynamics of sexual power, but also on the dynamics of power within the female gender. The camp at Moon Lake allows the girls temporarily to set aside at least some of the elements of class which control their daily lives, but even their separation from society is not enough to blur gender distinctions. To the end, Loch would rather remain isolated than socialize with girls, while Jinny Love is already planning to tattle once again.

These two stories, taken together, show the direction the near-drowning trope is taking at mid-century. While some women, such as Easter, still require a male to save them from death by drowning, other women, such as Hazel, are able to use the drowning scenario as a means to their own ends. Nonetheless, both of these stories retain the mythology surrounding women’s death by drowning: Easter is developing into a physically mature and therefore potentially sexual woman at the time of her near-drowning, while Hazel, as a newly

fertile woman, is already sexualized. Thus, their association with water and drowning is an expected one.

CHAPTER 5

MARGARET ATWOOD: SURVIVAL AND INDEPENDENCE

“Water is nebulous, it has no shape, you can pass your hand right through it; yet it can kill you. The force of such a thing is in its momentum, its trajectory. What it collides with, and how fast” (*The Blind Assassin* 270).

Margaret Atwood writes of drownings and near-drownings perhaps more often than any other contemporary author. When asked about this phenomenon in her writing, she replied, “I grew up by a lake. People drowned in it. I know some people who have drowned, or nearly drowned. Canada is full of water. There’s just a lot of drowning going on” (*Conversations* 206). However, that simple answer seems facile. Atwood does develop her response a bit further in *Survival*, her 1972 critical assessment of Canadian literature. She observes, “The Canadian author’s two favorite ‘natural’ methods for dispatching his victims are drowning and freezing, drowning being preferred by poets-- probably because it can be used as a metaphor for a descent into the unconscious-- and freezing by prose writers” (55). While other Canadian prose authors may indeed freeze their characters, Atwood herself prefers to drown them-- or, more often, nearly drown them.

The female body and its parts are important in virtually all of Atwood’s work, and near-drownings serve as an extension of her interest in the body as well as an homage to her literary foremothers. Drowning is so pervasive in Atwood’s work that even her fiction that does not include actual near-drownings, such as her novel *The Blind Assassin* (2000), includes

figurative and allusive references to drowning. Atwood's work is another progression in the continuum seen in twentieth-century North American fiction by women: helpless drowning victim progressing to passive rescuee to active survivor. Perhaps predictably, in Atwood, not only do most female protagonists survive their near-drowning experiences, but unlike the protagonists of the earlier texts I have discussed, they also do so without assistance from men. A few of the Atwood texts which include near-drowning scenes include her third novel *Lady Oracle* (1976) and the short stories "The Whirlpool Rapids" and "Walking on Water," published in the collection *Bluebeard's Egg* (1986). Her most recent novel, *The Blind Assassin* (2000), does not include an actual drowning, but includes a death near water (a car accident off a bridge) that incorporates many of the features of the traditional literary drowning scenario. This novel is especially interesting because it includes an actual suicide in the water, which would initially appear to be regressive. But because the novel is set in the mid-twentieth century, rather than reflecting a contemporary version of the paradigm, it reflects the version of the trope which would have been in effect when the events in the novel take place.

Lady Oracle: **Faked Drowning, Failed Rebirth**

Lady Oracle riffs off of the drowning-novel tradition: instead of an actual drowning or near-drowning, the protagonist, Joan Foster, fakes her own drowning death, in a much more elaborate version of Hazel's escapade in "The Wide Net." As a writer, Joan is no doubt familiar with the tradition that would lead a woman, especially an artistic woman (such as Zenobia and Edna) to die by drowning. So when she decides to escape her troubles by fabricating her death, drowning is the obvious way to go. But Joan gains only limited self-

knowledge from her faked drowning; just as the drowning itself is contrived and false, Joan continues to weave a web of falsehoods from the beginning to the end of the novel, aided by a first person narrative perspective which we initially believe to be her own, but which may in fact be a ghostwriter's voice.

Although Joan is a late-twentieth-century Canadian woman, she is still beset by many of the problems that affected her predecessors. Her sense of self is predicated on her relationship with a man— first an exiled Polish Count, then her husband Arthur, next an artist who styles himself the Royal Porcupine, and finally the journalist to whom she tells her story at the end of the novel. Further, although she lives in a time when women have transcended the nineteenth-century imperative to drown themselves for romantic reasons, Joan is still psychologically wedded to earlier notions of love and sexuality, as evidenced both by her Gothic- romance-writing vocation and her own romantic relationships.

Joan's story is told retrospectively; the novel begins,

I planned my death carefully; unlike my life, which meandered along from one thing to another, despite my feeble attempts to control it. My life had a tendency to spread, to get flabby, to scroll and festoon like the frame of a baroque mirror, which came from following the line of least resistance. I wanted my death, by contrast, to be neat and simple, understated, even a little severe, like a Quaker church or the basic black dress with a single strand of pearls much praised by fashion magazines when I was fifteen. No trumpets, no megaphones, no spangles, no loose ends, this time. The trick was to disappear without a trace, leaving behind me the shadow of a corpse,

a shadow everyone would mistake for solid reality. At first I thought I'd managed it. (3)

This paragraph includes many of the themes of Joan's life. Margery Fee observes, "Since childhood, Joan has voraciously soaked up fantasies from magazines, movies, ballet, her mother's historical romances, her father's murder mysteries, opera, fairy tales, and, not least, her aunt's advice columns. All these convey an idea of how society ought to be and how women ought to behave in it" (53). These Madame-Bovary-like fantasies become a large component of Joan's reality. Her attempts to live these fantasies include the death-longing that culminates not in a real drowning, but in an artificial drowning that is a failed rebirth attempt.

The entire novel is comprised of these multilayered complications (not to mention multilayered metaphors) that are evident from the very beginning of the novel, and to complicate things still further, Joan is a narrator at least as unreliable as, though less sinister than, Hawthorne's Miles Coverdale. Until the final chapter, readers are led to that the first person narrative voice is Joan's own; she then implies, however, that her story may in fact have been written, ostensibly in Joan's voice, by the journalist who has discovered her secret. However, the story she tells him, and he may be telling us, is not the "real" one, either. Near the end of *Lady Oracle*, Joan muses about the version of the story we have just finished reading: "I guess it will make a pretty weird story, once he's written it; and the odd thing is that I didn't tell any lies. Well, not very many. Some of the names and a few other things, but nothing major" (378). So the narrative perspective in the novel looks something like this: the events of the narrative, filtered through Joan's consciousness, told, without complete candor, to a journalist, who then filters the events through his own consciousness

but writes them ostensibly from Joan's point of view-- or, perhaps, the journalist's narrative is a different one altogether from the one presented in the novel *Lady Oracle*. Joan's already slippery character becomes even more so as it becomes clear that the narrative may not be the first-person account by a more-or-less reliable narrator that we have believed it to be, and Joan's pretend drowning is just one component of this elaborate web of deception and multiplicity.

Joan rehearses her own make-believe death in a variety of ways in the narrative. There are two actual deaths: first Joan's beloved Aunt Lou, and later her not-so-beloved mother. Joan's relationship to both of these women is as complex as her relationship with her own body. Aunt Lou is Joan's nurturer, taking her to movies and shopping, and providing her with the affection Joan's own mother is unwilling to give. Roxanne J. Fand characterizes Aunt Lou as "the only potential counteraction of her mother's destructive influence....who not only thrives on her multiple-faceted personality from a base of undefined self-confidence, but conveys to Joan something of her spirit" (185). Like Joan, Lou has a double life: a public persona as a never-married author of feminine hygiene tracts and a secret life as husband to a long-vanished gambler and lover to a married man. Unlike Joan, Lou is comfortable with these multiple personae; she recognizes and even embraces "the multiplicity and duplicity of everyone" (Fand 185), while Joan finds her own and others' multiple selves distressing. Aunt Lou, herself overweight, is the catalyst for Joan's physical transformation. When Lou dies, suddenly, of a heart attack, teen-aged Joan is devastated. However, Lou leaves her a legacy-- two thousand dollars-- on the condition that she lose one hundred pounds. Aided by a bout of blood poisoning after she is shot with an arrow (yet

another death-rehearsal), Joan loses the weight, gets the money, and is physically, if not psychologically, free of her mother's control.

Joan's mother is critical and demeaning, but is still an important force in her life. Her control over Joan has centered on coercing Joan to lose weight; when Joan finally chooses to lose weight on her own, her mother crumbles, begins drinking even more than usual, and eventually, in a Gothic twist, stabs Joan in the arm with a paring knife; just as the heroines of the novels Joan will later write must make dramatic escapes from their tormentors, Joan flees in the night, and will never see her mother, other than as an apparition, again. However, Mrs. Foster continues to exert her influence over Joan. Nora Foster Stovel characterizes Joan's mother as "an alter ego" who appears to Joan in her astral body, dressed in a navy blue suit and white gloves, to haunt Joan "even before her [Mrs. Foster's] death" (56). These ghostly visions not only represent the hold Joan's mother still has on her, but also, via her prim outfit, represents the hold that the patriarchal culture's traditional view of femininity has on Joan, despite her attempts to discard it. Catherine Sheldrick Ross expands on this idea when she notes "the dangerous similarity" between mother and daughter:

Both are onlookers, not participants, in life and use alcohol and fat as protective disguises. Both yearn for a simplified, static, and essentially dead world. Both feel sorry for themselves and spend a lot of time crying. Joan's mother makes a better warning than model, and Joan sees that she must release her mother's ghost before she can ever be free herself. (465)

Joan eventually realizes that she is creating the astral projections of her mother— rather than her mother choosing to visit her, Joan is subconsciously summoning these visions (or

perhaps hallucinations). This realization helps her to loose the psychological hold that her mother has on her and begin, however tentatively and limitedly, to create her own identity.

Joan's father, an anesthesiologist who resuscitates people who have attempted to commit suicide, provides her with an additional early perspective on mortality. His ability is presented as more magical than medical; he "brings them [suicides] to life again" (77). Previously, however, he was in military intelligence, killing supposed spies. He is a distant father to Joan, so she is able to cast him as both the mysterious stranger who will be a commonplace figure in her Costume Gothics and as a powerful life-giver and life-taker. However, as is typical of the father-daughter relationship, he also is a model that she seeks to duplicate in her own lovers. As Frank Davey notes, "Out of touch...with her unconscious view of men as simultaneously killers and rescuers like her father, she is plagued by her projection of this view onto the basically unremarkable men she leads her life with" (219). Also, Joan believes, perhaps correctly, that her father may have had some hand in her mother's death. Ann McMillan aptly compares Joan's speculations to those of Catherine in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*; Atwood herself has compared the parody of Gothic sensibilities in *Lady Oracle* with that in Austen's novel (*Conversations* 65-66). McMillan observes of *Northanger Abbey*'s protagonist, "Undeniably, Catherine...errs in many perceptions, especially in believing that General Tilney has killed his wife. Yet, after all, she is right to recoil from him" (57). Unlike Austen's readers, Atwood's never learn for sure whether Joan's suspicions are correct. However, her father certainly has the ability, the opportunity, and the motive to push her mother down a flight of stairs. So perhaps, like Catherine, Joan is right to recoil. Joan recognizes her father's capacity for death-dealing, so

he is a natural candidate for the role of hero-villain, just like the men in the novels Joan writes.

These Costume Gothics are the most overt rehearsal of Joan's death in the novel. Each of the heroines Joan creates faces danger, then overcomes it to marry the hero. These novels are escapes for Joan as writer just as they are escapes for her readers. Lucy M. Freibert finds that "In writing the gothics, Joan lives out the romance which her socialization has promised but which reality has not produced" (28). She does not confine her romanticizing to her novel-writing, though; she begins to apply it to her actual life. As *Lady Oracle* progresses, Joan becomes increasingly enmeshed in the novel she is writing, *Stalked By Love*. Atwood provides readers with excerpts from Joan's novel, showing its transformation from a traditional Costume Gothic (much like a Harlequin Romance) into a bizarre horror novel that is a manifestation of Joan's own inner turmoil. She begins to sympathize with the villainous wife, Felicia, and comes to dislike the prissiness of the heroine she has created. Just as her life begins to create problems in her novel, her novels create problems with her life. Susan Jaret McKinstry notes, "...like her heroines, Joan becomes trapped in the maze of romantic vision. She cannot be both controlling author and victimized heroine, for those roles are not compatible: one demands independent imagination, the other passive obedience to sexual and social conventions of heroism" (60). This conflict, which manifests itself as the clash between her roles as traditional wife and famous poet, leads circuitously to her decision to fake her death. All of these associations with death in Joan's novels and in her actual life make escape from life via death a natural choice for her, even when that death is counterfeit and not the actual suicide that her literary predecessors might have committed.

To one degree or another, Joan seeks unrealistic levels of excitement in all of her own romantic relationships. Although she chooses men who, like her, are doubled-- her first lover Paul/ The Polish Count, her husband Arthur/radical activist, and her lover Chuck Brewer/ The Royal Porcupine-- she finds that beneath each exciting veneer is an ordinary man who wants a traditional marriage and a (more or less) ordinary life. Even her blackmailer, Fraser Buchanan, has a dual nature, since he pretends to be a critic but is really a criminal. Joan cannot reconcile the romantic world of the Costume Gothics she creates with the actual world of her life, and is thus doomed to disappointment. Ann McMillan writes:

Each of the men important to Joan seems first hero, then villain.... She flees from a lonely and banal existence into the arms of Paul, her first lover.... Her growing uneasiness with him necessitates her casting of Arthur in the role of hero. From Arthur she escapes to the Royal Porcupine, whose eccentric appearance promises material for heroic transformation. To her horror, though, she transforms him backwards, into the antiheroic Chuck Brewer. Clean-shaven and T-shirted, Chuck is too much reality for Joan, who flees back to Arthur. (58)

Paul, whom Joan terms the Polish Count, is initially her rescuer, helping her when she twists her ankle exiting a London bus. He also inspires her career as a writer of Costume Gothics, since he writes generically similar "nurse novels." However, when Joan begins to make more money per novel than the Count and begins spending time on Portobello Road doing research, "She stops being the perfect mistress.... His reversal from rescuer to villain, then, concerns his assessment of her work and of her as mistress or writer" (Jensen 39).

Joan also frames Arthur as her rescuer; when she moves in with him to escape the Polish Count, who is making her increasingly anxious, she tells him she has been evicted because of her “political sympathies” (190). In part because of these lies and her own secretiveness, and in part because of his own reluctance to know the truth, Joan’s husband, Arthur, is unaware of many important elements of Joan’s life. He does not know that she was an obese teenager, nor is he aware of her vocation as a writer of Costume Gothics. Her past and her career are integral to understanding Joan; not surprisingly, then, Arthur does not know his wife very well. When Joan does reveal truths to him-- telling him her book of poems, *Lady Oracle*, is to be published, for instance-- he is disapproving, and as Emily Jensen concludes, “Arthur’s denial of Joan as a writer means to her his rejection of her as a person” (36). Then too, Joan does not know Arthur very well-- her image of him is that of a dashing radical, not the conventional husband he actually is. As Sharon Wilson notes, “...she hopes the men in her ‘real’ life will be like Redmond and the other Heathcliff-Rochester heroes she invents in Costume Gothics” (55).

The Royal Porcupine is certainly the closest she comes to finding her Gothic hero. Like Joan, he has two selves, the fanciful “con-create artist” and the prosaic Chuck Brewer, and like her, he is fond of costumes and dancing, both of which Arthur rejects. Freibert notes that “He is so like Joan in his romantic notions and appearance that he seems to be one of her fantasies” (28), though I doubt her fantasies would include the dead husky and other animals which the Porcupine lugs home and stores in his deep-freeze, preparing them to be his next works of art. As Arnold E. and Cathy N. Davidson note, “Fantasy is not always escape,” and they find that after Joan rejects his Chuck Brewer persona, he “becomes much more like his Gothic doubles. He hints of suicide, double suicide, murder” (171). But

Joan is horrified to realize that, far from being her fantasy or even the incarnation of one of the heroes of her novels, Chuck actually just wants to be a regular-guy husband to her— just like Arthur, the ordinary husband she was escaping from when she began her affair.

Joan's elaborate and vivid fantasy life contains distorted images of herself taking risks, as well. The circus Fat Lady who is a staple of Joan's imaginings is forever performing feats of daring, such as walking a tightrope. This tightrope-walking is of course a metaphor for Joan's own life; she is always walking a proverbial tightrope between lying and being found out, while the Fat Lady herself is, according to Molly Hite, "a sort of ghostly residue of her overweight childhood" (137-38).

Joan's obesity during childhood and adolescence, while she is "eating steadily, doggedly, stubbornly, anything I could get" (73), has several consequences. She does not receive attention from boys, and what she does receive is rather bizarre. For instance, a boy, rejected by another girl, buries his face in her belly, while a Mediterranean co-worker at a restaurant woos her with fried shrimp, then proposes to her, hoping she will help him run his own restaurant. These experiences are no substitute for the world of dates and dances that her slimmer friends enjoy. Joan's mother is another source of rejection; she is deeply disappointed in her daughter's appearance, so ignores her as much as possible. Among the reasons for Joan's weight gain is her mother's assertion that she was an "accident"; Joan observes, "I ate to defy her, but I also ate from panic. Sometimes I was afraid I wasn't really there, I was an accident; I'd heard her call me an accident. Did I want to become solid, solid as a stone so she wouldn't be able to get rid of me?" (82-83). Ironically, however, Joan's obesity actually makes her less visible to others: "...Fat women are not more noticeable than thin women; they're less noticeable, because people find them distressing and look away....

If I'd ever robbed a bank no witness would have been able to describe me accurately" (87-88). Therefore, even after Joan has grown up, slimmed down, and written a book that has landed her on the talk-show circuit, she tends to believe that she is invisible, or will not be remembered by others. Like Emma, the protagonist of "The Whirlpool Rapids" and "Walking on Water," the overweight Joan views herself as invulnerable, but in a negative rather than positive way; her fat acts as a sort of invisibility cloak, shielding her from the male gaze. After losing one hundred pounds, she realizes:

I'd never developed the usual female fears.... I didn't experience men as aggressive lechers, but as bashful, elusive creatures who could think of nothing to say to me and who faded away at my approach.... So when I shrank to normal size I had none of these fears, and I had to develop them artificially. I had to keep reminding myself: Don't go there alone. Don't go out at night. Eyes front. Don't look, even if it interests you. Don't stop. Don't get out of the car. Keep going. (155)

Molly Hite finds that "Atwood's representation of the consequences attendant on a dramatic change in body size reveals graphically that for a woman in Western society, to be perceived as sexual is to be a potential victim" (138). But to be fat is to be perceived as asexual, and thus for a young woman in a patriarchal culture, nonexistent. Joan's sense of invisibility continues even after she has slimmed down and is thus sexualized and visible to others.

Near-drowning experiences can be empowering for their survivors; however, as might be expected, Joan's deceitful imitation-drowning does not enhance her self image. She chooses drowning as a mode of mock-death based both on her fascination with literary women who die in (or on) water, especially Tennyson's Lady of Shalott (who "floated down

to Camelot...singing her last song” (1103)), and because of her belief that drowning is an invisible death, appropriate because of her own feelings of invisibility. It is a death in which there is no sure expectation of finding a body (literal invisibility), which is crucial since of course there will be no body. The real death on which she bases her own faked one is “a woman who had drowned in Lake Ontario, very simply, no frills. She had merely sunk like a stone, and her body had never been recovered. She’d made no attempt to catch the life preserver thrown to her” (330).

Despite her more-or-less well-laid plans, Joan’s faked death becomes a comedy of errors, as her two accomplices, Sam and Marlene, rent a sailboat which none of them really knows how to sail. Joan has left a rented car, her escape vehicle, on the shore, but the trio has difficulty controlling the boat well enough to get Joan within reasonable swimming distance of it. Also, the wind picks up, and the waves get bigger: “They had white foam streaks on them and were splashing over the sides of the boat” (336). Then, their plan goes seriously awry, in a parodic transformation of the drowning scene in *An American Tragedy*: Marlene “let go of the tiller. The boat swung, the sail collapsed, Sam ducked, and the flailing boom hit me in the small of the back and knocked me overboard” (336). She decides to continue as best she can with the original plan:

I couldn’t climb back into the boat and do it again the right way; I would have to proceed from here. I made a feeble dive and attempted to swim under the boat, as we had planned. I was supposed to come up on the other side, where I would be out of sight from the shore in case anyone was watching, and this move was necessary as I’d spotted a family at one of the picnic tables. I made it on the second try, but Marlene and Sam were still

looking on the side where I had disappeared: they seemed to have forgotten all about the plan....

I spat out more of the lake and lay back as flat as I could; if there was one thing I knew how to do it was float. I pointed myself toward shore.... We had bungled, but that wasn't so bad. It would look better than if I had simply dived off the boat. (337)

And in fact Joan is successful, at least in this part of her plan. She returns her rental car, boards her plane, and flies to Rome.

However, in all sorts of ways, Joan's attempt to achieve a paradigmatic drowning and rebirth without actually having to die is a failure. Her perception of invisibility leads her to believe that she can return to the same Italian town, even the same rented room that she and Arthur had stayed in the summer before, and no one will recognize her. Not only do all the locals at her destination recognize her, but they are also deeply suspicious that she arrives without her husband, cuts off and dyes her long red hair, and generally behaves, from their perspective, very oddly. They become even more alarmed when they discover her clothes from the near-drowning, which Joan has attempted to dispose of. She has buried the jeans and t-shirt as a sort of surrogate corpse, a corpse that does a Lazarus-act when someone finds the clothes and her landlord returns them to her, laundered and pressed. The clothes become a synecdochical substitute for Joan herself, foreshadowing both the failure of her "burial" on Terremoto and the return to Canada she is preparing for at the close of the novel. Margery Fee writes about Joan's belief that she will not be remembered, "What appears to be colossal stupidity here is, in fact, a revelation of her belief that she does not really exist, does not really have a self, even though she very obviously does" (40). Joan

plans to smoothly integrate into Italian culture; instead, she becomes an object of gossip and ridicule. She reflects, “Where was the new life I’d intended to step into, easily as crossing a river? It hadn’t materialized, and the old life went on without me, I was caged on my balcony waiting to change” (342). Marilyn Patton notes that Joan was “planning to begin a new life as easily as she usually begins writing a new book” (32), but of course, she discovers the impossibility of her task.

Joan naively believes that she can still return to her old life, so she sends her husband Arthur a postcard, hoping he will come rescue her (as the heroes of the Costume Gothics she writes surely would). Joan has changed everything via her faked death, however, which she realizes when Sam sends her a packet of newspaper clippings with the message, “Congratulations. You’ve become a death cult” (345). The newspaper articles concluded that her death had been a suicide, and Joan thinks, “I’d been shoved into the ranks of those other unhappy ladies, scores of them apparently, who’d been killed by a surfeit of words. There I was, on the bottom of the death barge where I’d once longed to be, my name on the prow, winding my way down the river” (346). The allure of the artistic, Lady-of-Shallott-like death is considerable, even when it is her own death being discussed: “I began to feel that even though I hadn’t committed suicide, perhaps I should have. They made it sound so plausible” (346). Ultimately, however, she finds the assumption that she has killed herself, rather than died accidentally, annoying: “So they thought I jumped on purpose, refused the life preserver, and sank intentionally, and there was nothing I could do to prove them wrong, though an anonymous informant had volunteered the information that it wouldn’t have been like me to commit suicide, I loved life. And it wasn’t like me, at all” (347). Joan

resists a connection with literary predecessors such as Edna Pontellier, who selected death by drowning from a limited menu of life-choices.

Joan devotes herself to her latest Costume Gothic, *Stalked by Love*; she decides “to ignore my suicide, since there was nothing I could do about it” (348). However, she begins to lose control of her novel-in-progress, and the novel begins to reflect the problems she is experiencing in her life. In one draft of the novel, Felicia, the evil wife, who resembles Joan, is “drowned in an unfortunate accident when he [her husband Redmond] surprised her fornicating in a punt with his half brother on the River Papple” (354). Predictably, Joan’s romance novels return to the old models, punishing female sexual misbehavior with drowning. Equally predictably, in a soap-opera twist, Joan’s alter ego Felicia has not really been killed, and like Joan, is able to rejoin the living.

Joan’s pretend drowning and subsequent loneliness and isolation punish her illicit sexual affair with the Royal Porcupine, or at any rate punish her guilt over it, not to mention her constant dissembling to Arthur, just as actual drownings typically punished illicit sexuality among her literary forebears. Sybil Korff Vincent additionally finds that, “By killing her old selves, Joan punishes them for the wicked deeds she has enjoyed, and atones” (162), but killing these old selves proves to be burdened with its own considerable complications.

Because she has no workable long-term plan for her future, although she is not literally dead, her prospects for a happy life in Italy are very limited. Returning to Canada seems like her only viable option, but this option, too, is problematic, fraught with embarrassment and uncertainty. Soon, Joan’s hand is forced: Sam and Marlene are arrested for her murder. Marlene’s assertion that they threw a life preserver to Joan was a mistake,

since a picnicking family who had witnessed the incident had, of course, seen no life preserver, and there was not even a life preserver on the boat. This unwelcome misinterpretation leaves Joan in a quandary: return, and admit that she had faked her death? Or stay, and consign Sam and Marlene to a trial and possible conviction?

Eventually, a reporter traces Joan to her rented room, and when he knocks on her door, Joan, in the grip of the romantic delusions fostered by her immersion in *Stalked by Love*, hits him over the head with a Cinzano bottle, sending him to the hospital. However, she compensates him by telling him her story. Ultimately, Joan decides to return to Canada, get Sam and Marlene released, and begin some kind of new life. Barbara Hill Rigney makes an observation about Atwood's *Surfacing* that applies just as readily to *Lady Oracle*:

"Drowning...comes to represent not only death or a loss of self, but also a procedure for finding the self" (107). But like the unnamed narrator of *Surfacing* and Marian, the protagonist of Atwood's first novel, *The Edible Woman*, Joan develops only partial understanding; at the end of the novel, she has a substantial amount of territory left to cover before she finds herself. She is perhaps even more exasperating than the other two women, however, because she seems on the cusp of an epiphany, and never quite manages it.

She does decide to quit writing Costume Gothics, because "I think they were bad for me" (379), and does, as Margery Fee notes, begin to take some responsibility for her actions (45), but she is still as susceptible as ever to romanticism rather than reality. Nonetheless, Arnold E. and Cathy N. Davidson find that the failure of her faked death is "a fortunate fall. Inadvertently, her feigned death finally forces her to repudiate various false identities. Until then, however, her ostensible drowning is part of a symbiotic pattern whereby unconscious self-victimization and ineffectual escape fantasy each fosters the other" (170). She

observes, “I keep thinking I should learn some lesson from all of this” (379), but clearly has little idea what that lesson is. As Roxanne J. Fand notes, “She realizes she cannot escape because she is bound up in responsibility to others... not just to her own narrow survival. This development only indicates that her moral decency is being tested as never before, and that she has passed to another level of comprehensiveness, but it may still not address her central problem” which is “to overcome her lifetime addiction to romance and ad hoc facades” (194-95). She repeats her old pattern of romanticizing men with the reporter whom she has hit, and Frank Davey believes that she is “seemingly on the verge of repeating her characteristic excessive trust/ excessive mistrust cycle” with him (211). Just as she fits the Polish Count, Arthur, and the Royal Porcupine into her fanciful molds, she begins to create a mold for the reporter, one which, as Davey writes, is “not too dissimilar from the organizing fantasy of the nurse novels of her first lover, Paul” (218): “...There is something about a man in a bandage... Also I’ve begun to feel he’s the only person who knows anything about me” (380). The only person, indeed— including, perhaps, Joan herself. Despite Joan’s limited development, *Lady Oracle* represents a significant advance in the drowning paradigm, because Joan uses cultural expectations about women and drowning to enable her to make the escape she desires.

“Two Stories About Emma”: Near-Drowning As Personal Empowerment

Atwood’s stories “The Whirlpool Rapids” and “Walking on Water,” grouped as “Two Stories About Emma,” appear in her 1986 collection *Bluebeard’s Egg*, and both include near-drowning scenarios. These stories, like Pam Houston’s “Selway” and “Cataract,” feature a woman who is adventuresome and at home on the water, but who nonetheless

almost dies in it. Emma, the protagonist of both Atwood stories, is characterized as seemingly “born without fear” (111), although we learn that she in fact acquires her fearlessness at age twenty-one, after surviving her first near-drowning in “The Whirlpool Rapids.” In this story, Emma is a waitress in a Niagara Falls diner, and is invited by a friend, Bill, to go on the final test run of a forty-person raft that is to be a tourist attraction. However, the water level is too high and the current too swift. The near-drowning is told from Emma’s perspective, and comprises a sizable percentage of this rather brief short story:

All she saw was the front of the raft tipping down into a trough deeper than any they’d yet hit, while a foaming wall of water rose above them. The raft should have curved sinuously, sliding up the wave. Instead it buckled across the middle, the front half snapping towards the back, like the beak of a bird closing. Emma and Bill and the other people in the front row shot backwards over the heads of the rest, who were jumbling in a heap at the bottom of the V, now submerging. (Emma didn’t exactly see this at the time; she deduced it later. Her impressions were of her own movement only, and of course it was all very fast.)

Something struck her on the side of the head— a foot in a boot, perhaps— and she was underwater. Later she learned that the raft had flipped and a man had been trapped underneath it and drowned, so it was just as well that she had been flung clear. But underwater she did not think. Something else made her hold her breath and struggle toward the surface, which she could see above her, white and silver, so her eyes must have been open. Her head rose up, she gasped air and was sucked under.

The water tumbled and boiled and Emma fought it. She was filled almost to bursting with an energy that came from anger: *I refuse to die in such a stupid way*, was how she formulated this afterwards. She thinks she shouted, at least once, “No!” Which was a waste of breath, as there was nobody around to hear her. There were rocks, and she collided with several and was bruised and scraped, but nothing more hit her head, and after what seemed like an hour but was really only ten minutes the current was less and she found she could keep her head above the water and actually swim. (116)

Significant features of this passage include not only its attention to detail, but also the multilayered narrative perspective, which by now is a familiar Atwoodian device. What initially seems to be Emma’s moment-by-moment account is actually her reconstruction of events both as she experienced them and as she pieced them together (from news reports or other accounts?) later. This narrative perspective is reminiscent of the multi-layered perspective in *Lady Oracle*, although Emma is presented as a much more credible individual than Joan, and the narrator in the Emma stories is not a first-person one, but is instead an unnamed friend of Emma’s: at the beginning of the story, the narrator tells us that Emma is one of two fearless women she knows, a woman whose “luck has held” and “who has always intrigued me” (111). So, unlike the narrative voice in *Lady Oracle*, the narrator of the Emma stories seems to be reliable.

Note that there is a drowning victim in the scene I have quoted above, but, significantly, it is a man, just as in the other Emma story, “Walking on Water,” Emma is in danger of drowning, but it is her boyfriend, Robbie, who has the much closer call. Also, Emma’s friend Bill is much closer to actually drowning after being thrown from the raft:

“He had reached a point, under the water, at which he had given up, and the water had become very peaceful and very beautiful. This was how Emma realized that she herself hadn’t been at all close to death. But Bill’s bicycle-muscle legs had kicked by themselves, like a wounded frog’s, and brought him back” (117-18). So not only is Bill the “nearer-drowning” victim, but unlike Emma, Bill does not actively save himself, nor does he react angrily, as Emma does. Instead, he passively accepts his fate, and only his reflexes protect him. This is a significant shift in the drowning-fiction paradigm, and is the first work I have examined in which a man is drowned or very nearly drowned instead of his female counterpart. No longer is there a contrast between weak, drowning women and their strong, surviving male rescuers.

A further shift is the way that Emma is depicted as actively fighting the water, as opposed to passively waiting for a rescuer, as is the typical pattern in earlier near-drowning works. In “The Whirlpool Rapids,” however, there is no one available to save Emma, and she not only rescues herself, but also, after the accident, walks to the road and hitchhikes back to the motel where she works. Although these actions do not turn out to be the best choice, since she is unaccounted for and presumed dead by the time she reaches the motel (though she is later treated for shock, which partially explains her matter-of-fact behavior), they nevertheless show a new level of resourcefulness and independence.

Emma’s near-drowning experience changes her worldview; indeed, it empowers her and leaves her with a sensation of invulnerability. It also makes her realize “that many more people than she’d thought would have known about her death... and been affected by it in some way, but... they wouldn’t have been affected very deeply or for very long” (118). So she never has the melodramatic wishes for death that are very nearly Joan’s undoing, but she

also develops a sort of reverse egocentrism: “Because she found out early how very little difference she makes in the general scheme of things, she has clenched her teeth, ignored whimpers and hints and even threats, and done what she wanted, almost always” (118). Although the narrator characterizes Emma’s behavior as “sometimes dubious” (119), the effects of her experience nonetheless represent a development in the near-drowning paradigm in which the nearly-drowned woman experiences changes in her temperament that would traditionally be coded male, including self-centeredness rather than empathy and stoicism rather than sensitivity.

The second of Atwood’s two stories about Emma, “Walking on Water,” occurs several years after “The Whirlpool Rapids,” and includes not one but two near-drownings, although neither is as close a call as Emma’s raft accident. The first involves Emma’s decision to jump overboard while on a boat traveling up the Nile. Harassed by a “medium-sized, possibly thirtyish Arab, puzzled by the cultural discrepancies that had placed a young woman on a boat, wearing peculiar clothing and not enough of it” (120), she first tries bending his pinky back to get him to let go of her, but when that does not work, she jumps. Despite her fearlessness,

she had a brief instant of loss of faith as she was going down. What she thought was: *Crocodiles*. But there weren’t any, and the men yelled, and the boat stopped and backed up and retrieved her, as she knew it would. The men on the boat were respectful after that, keeping their distance and discussing her in low voices, and, she hoped, with awe. It was a gesture they understood. They hadn’t believed a young Western woman travelling alone

could ever have been serious enough about what they considered her honour
to risk death for it. (121)

In this narrative, then, the link between drowning and sexuality is so close that it transcends cultural and language barriers. Drowning becomes a tool appropriated by Emma to communicate her sexual inaccessibility to these men. And Emma's sense of invulnerability, created by the rafting accident, gives her special confidence that nothing unfortunate could happen to her: "She felt a little cheap, pulling a trick like that— though it was clearly the only thing to do, under the circumstances— because she knew she hadn't been risking anything at all. She'd never had any intention of dying" (121). Much like Joan in *Lady Oracle*, Emma has taken what was once a death chosen out of desperation and molded its simulacrum to fit her own purposes, secure in the knowledge that she would survive the near-drowning scenario she concocts.

Not only is Emma confident that she can survive the water, but she also possesses a sexual freedom not seen in earlier works with drowning themes. "Emma, although tall, is always falling in love" (122), usually with married men. Her third near-drowning experience occurs while she is having an affair with Robbie, "who had been her professor at college" (122). However, sexually liberated women such as Emma are no longer punished by drowning. Emma, on vacation with Robbie in the Caribbean, is inspired by a local legend: there was a ridge extending to a nearby island, and "Local tradition had it that at low tide it was possible to walk from one island to another, across the ridge. A man in trouble with his neighbor over a woman had done this within recent memory...the ridge-walker had come out of it the hero and was known afterwards as Jesus Christ, because he had walked on water" (125). Emma, bored with her uneventful stay on the island, decides to repeat Jesus

Christ's feat, and convinces Robbie to accompany her. Although Emma herself completes the crossing uninjured, Robbie nearly drowns. Fairly soon after beginning her journey, Emma discovers that she has not thought of a few features of the trip:

A quarter of the way out, Emma realized that the water was much colder than it was when you just went swimming in it. Also, the current in the channel between the islands was stronger than she'd thought. ...the current wasn't something she'd included in her mental picture of this little stroll.... She decided they wouldn't try to walk back, but would signal someone from the main island to come and get them. (126)

But these problems, though significant, do not prove to be their most serious:

She had to concentrate, which was why she didn't look around earlier, to see where Robbie was. Now she did.

At first she didn't see him at all. He wasn't on the ridge behind her, where he should have been. What she did see was that the hill overlooking the bay was black with people. They were sitting quietly, as if at a play, intent on the performance going on before them.

The performance was Robbie drowning. Emma saw him now: he'd been swept off the reef and was being carried through the channel by the current, out to sea. (127)

Although an islander eventually rows out to rescue Robbie, he goes into shock and becomes quite ill, much as Emma goes into shock after her near-drowning in "The Whirlpool Rapids." However, Robbie is a far more self-indulgent near-drowning victim than Emma is: "Robbie lay around covered with a sheet, like half a corpse, while Emma grovelled. He

accepted her apologies, looking wan and forgiving and pastel as an Easter card, his red hair making his face look whitish green. As soon as he felt better he became more grumpy than usual” (129). So although Emma was certainly in danger during her stunt, Robbie becomes her near-drowning surrogate, and Emma is quick to revert to culturally normative feminine behaviors after Robbie’s misadventure. She coddles him and repeatedly apologizes. So even though her body has transcended the drowning-imperative, her psyche has not yet liberated itself of thoughts and behaviors encoded by her patriarchal culture. “Walking on Water” is nonetheless a progression in the motif, because it shows a man who is violating cultural norms about sexuality by having an adulterous affair— and this time it is he who is punished by nearly drowning, while his partner is uninjured. This story, a seemingly innocuous little tale that has received almost no critical attention, thus represents a remarkable, radical shift in the drowning-fiction paradigm.

The Blind Assassin: A Drowning-Narrative Period Piece

Atwood’s most recent novel at this writing, *The Blind Assassin*, does not feature an actual drowning. However, it comes close: the novel opens, “Ten days after the war ended, my sister Laura drove a car off a bridge” (1). While apparently Laura’s death was not caused by drowning, but rather by the impact of the crash, the drowning-symbolism still holds. In this novel, we see a reversion to the old, traditional drowning scene-- since the novel is set in the 1930's and 40's, it is as if Atwood has returned to the 1930's, pre-*Their-Eyes-Were-Watching-God* version of the paradigm, with a young woman killing herself over a man. It acts as a sort of period piece for drowning narratives. Though postmodern in style, told by a primary narrator, Iris, and containing a novel-within-a-novel, ostensibly written by Laura, the

novel is in essence a fairy tale in reverse, in which the handsome, rich prince marries the beautiful but poor young girl, and no one lives happily ever after. The rich prince (in this version, an industrialist with the kingly name of Richard) turns out to be a pedophile who preys first on his eighteen-year-old bride, Iris, then on her younger sister Laura. The wicked stepmother role is played by the rich prince's sister, who acts as a veritable procurer for him, arranging his marriage to Iris and enabling his molestation of Laura. After Richard impregnates Laura and sends her to a mental hospital/ abortion clinic, she becomes increasingly fragile. Laura steals Iris's car and drives it off a bridge after Iris reveals to Laura that not only has her lover Alex been killed, but also that he was Iris's lover and the father of her child. By committing suicide, Laura is atoning both for the sins she perceives she has committed and for the sins she attributes to Iris.

Drowning is one of the primary symbols in the text, and references to it abound throughout the novel. The importance of drowning-images is fitting in view of the sexual intrigues which are central to the plot. A picnic photo is the central image in the text, but even it is linked to the drowning-image: the photograph originally includes Laura, Iris, and their mutual lover Alex. However, Laura makes two copies of the print, one for Iris, in which Alex and Iris remain, but only Laura's hand is visible, and one for herself, in which she removes all of Iris but her hand. Iris describes the photo: "The trace of blown cloud in the brilliant sky, like ice cream smudged on chrome. His smoke-stained fingers. The distant glint of water. All drowned now. Drowned, but shining" (5). Later, focusing on the photo again at the very end of her life, she laments, "Drowned now-- the tree as well, the sky, the wind, the clouds. All she has left is the picture. Also the story of it" (518). The now-elderly Iris describes her image in the mirror, again using drowning-language that calls to mind the

romantic Millais portrait of Ophelia: “Sometimes I see an older woman who might look like the grandmother I never knew, or like my own mother, if she managed to reach this age. But sometimes I see instead the young girl’s face I once spent so much time rearranging and deploring, drowned and floating just beneath my present face, which seems— especially in the afternoons, with the light on a slant— so loose and transparent I could peel it off like a stocking” (43). Iris even likens all deaths to drownings: “But why bother about the end of the world? It’s the end of the world every day, for someone. Time rises and rises, and when it reaches the level of your eyes you drown” (478).

Small wonder drowning and death become synonymous for Iris. Not only does drowning maintain its symbolic value, but also she is aware of frequent literal drownings, since she lives adjoining the Louveteau Gorge, where “the cliff is crumbling and dangerous, but the town won’t spend the money for a fence, it being the opinion here, still, that if you do a damn fool thing you deserve whatever consequences. Cardboard cups from the doughnut shop collect in the eddies below, and once in a while there’s a corpse, whether fallen or pushed or jumped is hard to tell, unless of course there’s a note” (49-50). These drownings become so commonplace that she can liken them to disposable cups, which though seemingly callous, is also apt— clearly, these people were disposable to someone, either themselves or someone else. Throughout her childhood and adolescence, Iris speculates about these drowned women; in her free time she would “stand on the Jubilee Bridge as if waiting for someone, gazing down at the black water and remembering the stories of women who had thrown themselves into it. They’d done it for love, because that was the effect love had on you.... Once you were in it— in love— you would be swept away, regardless. Or so the books had it” (200). Iris here explicitly correlates actual drownings

with those she has read about, acknowledging her participation in and awareness of the drowned-woman tradition.

In a scene from Iris's childhood, she and Laura float milkweed pods on the river, in a sort of celebration of the drowning-motif which prefigures Laura's own death: "...we went to the Jubilee Bridge and threw the pods into the river to see how long they'd sail, before they capsized or were swept away. Did we think about them as holding people, or a person? I'm not sure. But there was a certain satisfaction in watching them go under" (140). This "satisfaction" will find its echo later in the text, when Iris has such difficulty holding on to Laura after her rescue. Also, when Laura and Iris are young girls, they first hear about women drowning in the Louveteau River: "A woman jumped off the Jubilee Bridge above the rapids and the body wasn't found for two days. It was fished out downstream, and was far from a pretty sight because going through those rapids was like being run through a meat grinder" (141). This naturalistic depiction of the drowned body is similar in its grotesqueness to Hawthorne's description of the drowned Zenobia. The girls' nursemaid, Reenie, discusses these drownings with her friends, and concludes that the jumping is mostly done by women "in some...kind of trouble" (141), trouble which she does not say, but readers can infer, is sexual in nature-- an unwanted pregnancy, a desertion:

As well as jumping, said Reenie, women like that might walk into the river upstream and then be sucked under the surface by the weight of their wet clothing, so they couldn't swim to safety even if they'd wanted to. A man would be more deliberate. ...if intending to drown, they would attach rocks, or other heavy objects-- axe-heads, bags of nails. They didn't like to take any chances on a serious thing like that. But it was a woman's way just to walk in

and resign herself, and let the water take her. It was hard to tell from

Reenie's tone whether she approved of these differences or not. (141)

Reenie acts as a historical voice in the novel; she acquaints Laura and Iris not only with many elements of their personal history, but also shares with them cultural artifacts such as the fact that women "walk in and resign" themselves. Sensible Reenie would never do something as frivolous as drowning herself. (When she is unmarried and pregnant, rather than drowning herself in the river she quickly marries the first available man, who may or may not be the baby's father.) She characterizes Laura as one of these drownable women, however: "She was the type to panic and thrash around and drown in six inches of water, through not keeping her head" (147-48).

Although Reenie is correct that Laura is the type of woman apt to drown, she is wrong in thinking that Laura would lose her head. In fact, Laura is very deliberate in her water-death-seeking. As a child, she attempts to drown herself as she and Iris are "walking along the path beside the Louveteau, below the Gorge" (150). Iris reports, "All of a sudden Laura was in the river. Luckily we weren't right beside the main current, so she wasn't swept away. I screamed and ran downstream and got hold of her by the coat...and I almost fell in myself" (150). When Iris asserts that Laura "did it on purpose" and asks her why, she replies, "So God would let Mother be alive again" (150-51). Even at a young age, then, Laura seems instinctively to understand the connection between water and female life and death.

Once home, while Laura is being coddled, Iris ponders the near disaster:

I lay awake for hours that night.... I couldn't get out of my mind the image of Laura, in the icy black water of the Louveteau— how her hair had spread

out like smoke in a swirling wind, how her wet face had gleamed silvery, how she had glared at me when I'd grabbed her by the coat. How hard it had been to hold on to her. How close I had come to letting go. (151)

Iris's revelation shows the allure of drowning, and the romantic nature of the first part of this passage, including the descriptions of Laura's hair and face, could be, once again, straight from Millais's painting of Ophelia. Atwood has chosen the graphic image of ground meat to describe an actual drowning victim, but she allows Laura to be beautiful in her near miss.

Margaret Atwood's fiction displays the direction and range drowning and near-drowning fiction is taking in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Joan's adoption of the drowning motif to suit her own purposes, to Emma's empowerment by near-drowning, to Laura's return to earlier versions of the motif show the three major categories that I believe will characterize developments in near-drowning fiction in the twenty-first century.

CHAPTER 6

TRENDS IN CONTEMPORARY NEAR-DROWNING FICTION

AND PAM HOUSTON'S "SELWAY" AND "CATARACT"

In current North American fiction, women protagonists still encounter situations in which they might drown. If that fiction is written by a woman, however, it is unlikely that the female character will succumb to a watery death. In fact, contemporary women quite often save themselves from drowning. Further, contemporary women protagonists in near-drowning narratives tend to be risk-takers; they often deliberately put themselves in conditions in which drowning is a possibility, as though they must confront the force that has killed so many of their literary ancestors. Nonetheless, sex and death by drowning are still inextricably linked. Pam Houston's 1992 short story "Selway" includes both a drowned female body and a protagonist who escapes death by drowning; both are river rafters who have chosen to confront literature's traditional female peril. Houston's 1998 story "Cataract" is a variation on the same theme, in which two women, the protagonist and her friend, both survive a river rafting misadventure. Even in a six-year span, if we examine two similar stories by the same author, we see a progression. In the earlier story, the protagonist must acknowledge the drowned woman, while in "Cataract," she acknowledges only the possibility of her and her friend's deaths.

In contrast, a story published in 1993 by a male author, Stuart Dybek's "We Didn't," incorporates the old, familiar trope of the drowned female body, albeit with an evident awareness of the literary tradition he is continuing. While "Selway"'s drowned female body

serves as a warning so that the female characters can avoid the drowned woman's fate, the body in "We Didn't" symbolizes the male narrator's unsuccessful attempts to actualize his sexuality while simultaneously functioning as a warning to his girlfriend Julie. Each of these stories demonstrates the direction contemporary fiction that incorporates the drowning motif is taking. Dybek's narrator and his girlfriend demonstrate a self-conscious awareness of their participation in the drowned-woman tradition. Houston expands the horizons for women still further, pushing the envelope of female adventuresomeness and physical strength, while still acknowledging that even the most adventuresome of female protagonists cannot escape the inherent literal and symbolic danger that water poses.

Stuart Dybek's "We Didn't": A Contemporary Masculine Perspective

Dybek's story is narrated by an unnamed teenaged boy. The boy and his girlfriend Julie are on a beach, about to have sex for the first time. Police cars interrupt their tryst in order to fish a pregnant woman's body out of the water:

It was a woman— young, naked, her body limp and bluish beneath the play of flashlight beams. They set her on the sand just past the ring of drying, washed-up alewives. Her face was almost totally concealed by her hair. Her hair was brown and tangled in a way that even wind or sleep can't tangle hair, tangled as if it had absorbed the ripples of water— thick strands, slimy-looking like dead seaweed. (82)

This naturalistic representation of the dead woman's body is quite different from that we will see in Houston's "Selway"; however, it is reminiscent of the depiction of the drowned

woman in earlier fiction by men, such as Hawthorne's description of Zenobia in *The Blithedale Romance*. She, too, is ugly, discolored, and "slimy."

Ever after, the boy cannot escape from this vision of the body: "Even when she wasn't mentioned, she was there with her drowned body— so dumpy next to yours— and her sad breasts with their wrinkled nipples and sour milk... with her swollen belly and her pubic hair colorless in the glare of electric light, with her tangled, slimy hair and her pouting, placid face... and her skin a pallid white" (87). The boy's girlfriend, Julie, becomes obsessed with her memory of the dead woman's body. The boy attempts to make light of it, even suggesting that had she been washed up next to them, "we could have had a *ménage à trois*" (84). Predictably, however, his lame attempts at humor only anger Julie, and the couple never does consummate their relationship; the couple's completely different perspectives on the evening's events place a barrier between them that they cannot overcome, so their relationship ends.

Although the male narrator seems primarily concerned with the impact that this woman's drowning has had on his sex life, he and Julie nevertheless argue about the woman: "about whether her death was a suicide or murder, about whether her appearance that night was an omen or a coincidence, which, you argued, is what an omen is anyway: a coincidence that means something" (86). As they argue, they continue to speculate about the woman's death, providing a quick summary of some drowning motifs in literature of the past two centuries: "What's so goddamn funny about a woman who drowned herself and her baby?" ("Désirée's Baby"); "Like she just happened to be going for a walk pregnant and naked, and she fell in" (*The Awakening*, sans pregnancy); "Maybe the bastard who knocked her up killed her" (*An American Tragedy*) (85). Julie even asserts that the dead woman's death might not

have been a tragedy; as if she were a critic writing about *The Awakening*, she says, ““For all either one of us knows... she could have been triumphant!”” (87). Julie is worried about pregnancy, so the woman’s pregnant state seems especially significant to her. She sees the woman’s body as a warning about what might have happened had they followed through with their intention to have sex. She has dreams in which she is the drowning woman, unable to reach a raft that keeps drifting further away, or being “carried into the water” by a group of beachgoers and “forced under” (85-86). She empathizes with the drowning victim, subconsciously understanding the correlation between her emergent sexuality and the dead woman’s fate. For the young man, however, the tragedy is not so much the woman’s death, but the impediment it has been to his first sexual experience; “we didn’t” becomes almost a mantra for him: “we made not doing it a wonder, and yet we didn’t, we didn’t, we never did” (89).

Pam Houston’s “Selway” and “Cataract”: Near-Drownings and Adventure Fiction

Although Houston’s story “Selway” also includes the image of a drowned woman’s body, the function the body serves in the narrative is quite different. This story, in fact, seems to augur the future of drownings and near-drownings in fiction by women. Women are still capable of drowning, but they are also capable of triumphant survival, even when confronted by powerful and deadly natural forces. In Houston’s story, the protagonist and her boyfriend, Jack, have obtained a permit to raft the Selway River. Because the permits are very difficult to obtain, they choose to use their permit even though the river is dangerously high.

The narrator is a young woman conflicted in her relationship with Jack. She observes, "I've been to four years of college and I should know better, but I love it when he calls me baby" (23). She realizes that Jack is depending on her to be "the voice of reason" in their venture "because I'm a woman and that's how he thinks women are, but I've never been protective enough of anything, least of all myself" (24). But he is a sort of *tabula rasa* for her as well, a blank on which she can impose her ideas of what a man should be. Despite her difficulties in actual relationships with men, she is in tune enough with her own sexuality to be swayed by the connection between female sexuality and water as soon as she sees the powerful Selway: "When a river is at high water it's not just deeper and faster and colder than usual. It's got a different look and feel from the rest of the year.... Looking at its fullness made me want to grab Jack and throw him down on the boat ramp and make love right next to where the river roared by" (23).

But the river is not innocuously erotic; it is genuinely dangerous. The rafters who received the previous day's permit have an accident, and a woman in the party dies. Just as *The Blind Assassin's* Laura dies in the water but not because of it, the rafter does not drown but dies in the river, so the traditional symbolism remains. A fellow rafter on a training trip tells the narrator and Jack, "'They said she smashed her pelvis against a rock and bled to death internally.... They got her out in less than three minutes, and it was too late'" (32). The narrator sees her body being recovered: "And then we heard the beating of the propeller and saw the helicopter rising out over the river. We saw the hundred feet of cable hanging underneath it and then we saw the woman, arched like a dancer over the thick black belt they must use for transplanting wild animals, her long hair dangling, her arms slung back" (31). Just as animal imagery figures prominently in the flood scene in *Their Eyes Were*

Watching God, the victim is here framed as a “wild animal.” In contrast to many other images of drowned bodies such as Zenobia’s or Fanny Hosmer’s, this woman’s body is characterized as graceful, even beautiful. The narrator feels bonded to the dead woman, wondering “what she and I were doing out here on this river when [a fellow rafter’s] wife was home with that beautiful baby and happy” (33). Like Julie in Dybek’s story, she perceives the dead woman’s body as a warning; unlike Julie, she does not choose to heed the warning, and continues with her plan to raft the Selway.

Instead of being an impediment to the narrator’s sexual relationship with Jack, the sense of danger symbolized by the drowning woman fuels their sexual passion; that morning, they had “made love like crazy people, the way you do when you think it might be the last time ever” (27). Of the fiction by women discussed here, “Selway” is the only story which explicitly describes the sexual relationship between the protagonist and her partner. Here, it is “the one thing we had going for us” (25) in an otherwise conflicted relationship.

In keeping with the trend that we see in earlier fiction such as Atwood’s “Two Stories About Emma,” the narrator of “Selway” is competent and confident in the water, at least most of the time, though she does drop the bail bucket into the river at a critical point in the river run. She is not superwoman, but she is adventuresome and brave. Still, in a tidy bit of symbolism, it is Jack who rows the raft while the narrator bails water, so even fiction in written in the 1990’s can include the male as pilot (in this case literally, but more often, of course, figuratively) while the woman acts as preserver of order, bailing out the raft.

Literary history being what it is, when things go a bit wrong in the water, it is the woman who is imperiled. Just as it is the woman who dies on the previous day’s trip, it is the narrator who falls in the water when Jack loses control of the raft for a moment:

I heard Jack say “Hang on, baby,” and we hit the hole sideways and everything went white and cold. I was in the waves and underwater and I couldn’t see Jack or the boat, I couldn’t move my arms or legs apart from how the river tossed them. Jack had said swim down to the current, but I couldn’t tell which way was down and I couldn’t have moved there in that washing machine, my lungs full and taking on water. Then the wave spit me up, once, under the boat, and then again, clear of it, and I got a breath and pulled down away from the air and felt the current grab me, and I waited to get smashed against the rock, but the rock didn’t come and I was at the surface riding the crests of some eight-foot rollers and seeing Jack’s helmet bobbing in the water in front of me. “Swim, baby!” he yelled, and it was like it hadn’t occurred to me, like I was frozen there in the water. And I tried to swim but I couldn’t get a breath and my limbs wouldn’t move and I thought about the three minutes and hypothermia and I must have been swimming then because the shore started to get closer. (36-37)

In this breathless scene, with the exception of Jack’s injunction to “Swim!”, the narrator saves her own life without assistance. This is a woman who no longer needs a man to jump in the river to rescue her (even had such a rescue been possible). Nonetheless, Houston returns the narrator to her feminine roots by choosing the image of being inside a washing machine, an image that reminds us of female domestic labor even as the narrator labors to survive, having chosen a role as far removed as possible from that of the homemaker.

The narrator allows Jack to assume many responsibilities, such as rowing and recovering the raft after their accident. Nevertheless, she possesses far superior physical

strength and skill than do her female literary antecedents. When the narrator escapes from the river, she lands on “a tiny triangular rock ledge, surrounded on all sides by walls of granite” (37). Jack leaves her there so that he can attempt to retrieve the boat, but

When I saw the boat float by, right side up and empty, I decided to climb out of the space. ...I wedged myself between the granite walls and used my fingers, mostly, to climb.... I thought it would be stupid to live through the boating accident and smash my skull free-climbing on granite, but as I inched up the wall I got warmer and kept going.... When I came close to panic I thought of Rambo, as if he were a real person, as if what I was doing was possible, and proven before, by him. (37-38)

Her role model here, Rambo, is not merely a male, but a caricature of masculinity, a melange of stereotypical male traits such as physical strength and mental toughness (as well as violence and aggression). Female characters in fiction written by women can now co-opt these traits as their own, modifying them (using the toughness without the violence, for instance) to meet their own needs. This narrator has physical strength and ability of which earlier protagonists could only have dreamed. Edna’s triumph at learning to swim pales in comparison to this narrator’s free-climbing up a granite wall. But Rambo is not a real man; he is a cartoonish, exaggerated version of a man. And like Rambo, Pam Houston’s female characters tend to perfect their physical lives at the expense of their emotional ones.

Therefore, some of the narrator’s problems are not so different from those of earlier literary protagonists. Her relationship with Jack is different partly in that she reveals more details about their sex life than do her literary ancestors. But her concerns are still the same:

achieving autonomy and a loving relationship simultaneously and having and giving both freedom and fidelity. The narrator observes:

...the harder I looked at my life, the more I saw a series of men— wild in their own way— who thought because I said I wanted security and commitment, I did. Sometimes it seems this simple: I tamed them and made them dull as fence posts and left each one for someone wilder than the last. Jack is the wildest so far, and the hardest, and even though I've been proposed to sixteen times... I want him all to myself and at home more than I've ever wanted anything. (26)

But what she really seems to want, and cannot acknowledge that she wants, is a man who is able to openly express his feelings for her in some way other than sex. Physical strength and independence are important steps forward, but without the ability to forge successful relationships with men, the narrator cannot be completely fulfilled.

Like some of her predecessors, the narrator of “Selway” does gain some measure of self-awareness while on the river. She realizes, “...at first I thought I was there because I loved danger, but sitting on the rock I know I was there because I loved Jack. And maybe I went because his old girlfriends wouldn't, and maybe I went because I wanted him for mine, and maybe it didn't matter at all why I went because doing it for me and doing it for him amounted, finally, to exactly the same thing” (33-34). Further, as the couple is headed home from their trip, she realizes, “I thought about all the years I'd spent saying love and freedom were mutually exclusive and living my life as though they were exactly the same thing. The wind carried the smell of the mountains, high and sweet. It was so still I could imagine a peace without boredom” (41). Despite her strong body, her mind still needs some work.

She is at least able to recognize that she is a long way from self-actualization or even self-acceptance, but she is unable to resolve the duality she experiences between her speech and her behavior.

Houston's story "Cataract" shares many elements with "Selway." Again, a female narrator, Lucy, is embarking on a difficult and long-awaited river rafting trip. This time, however, there are four other rafters in Lucy's party: three men, her lover Josh and friends Henry and Russell, and another woman, Thea. The men are depicted as bungling and uncomprehending, while Thea is far more intuitive and attuned to Lucy.

The men are rafting in a separate boat, so Thea and Lucy are in their own river world. These women on the water, predictably, talk about sex. Lucy notes, "We floated to the other side of the river and began my favorite girls' boat conversation, naming in order all the men we'd made love to in our lives" (59). But these women are no Maggies or Robertas, drowned for one little indiscretion: "My total always came out somewhere between twenty-three and twenty-seven depending on how sharp my memory was that day, and also what we'd all agreed would count. Thea had had only half as many, but she was five years younger and, because of her stepfather, a whole world angrier at men than me" (59-60). These women experience a sexual freedom that Edna never dreamed of, that Janie never knew, and they manage, still, not to drown. Although we are never told any more about Thea's stepfather (though the implication is that he sexually abused her) she demonstrates that the sexualized woman in Houston's world does not always experience sex as healthy and empowering, but can experience it as emotionally crippling.

One feature of the women's river rafting skills that sets them apart from the men is their ability to work with the river instead of against it, perceiving it as an ally rather than an

opponent. Lucy still, occasionally, diminishes herself– “I’m strong for a girl,” (49) she observes, seemingly without irony, and notes, “I’d been running rivers a lot of years by then but I didn’t overwhelm anybody with my level of confidence, hadn’t ever acquired what I would call an athlete’s natural grace” (48). However, she also has a keen perception of her water-strength: “I took to the river because I believed it talked to me. I believed that I could read the river, that I could understand its language, that I could let it tell me, sometimes even mid-rapid, exactly where it wanted me to be” (49). Lucy’s identification with the water is coupled with her technical knowledge of it. The river level as she and her companions are about to run the rapids is “61,000 cubic feet of water per second and rising. Everyone who ran Cataract Canyon knew the sixty thousands were the most difficult level to negotiate, not counting, of course, the hundred-year flood” (48). Her self-image is intimately connected to this knowledge: “People said I was good at running rivers and I’d come to believe that they liked me because of it. I never gave much thought to what would happen if I stopped. I just kept taking each river on, like I took on every other thing my life served up to me: not an *if*, but a *how*” (53).

Lucy’s concern with water is not limited to the river’s raging rapids. She becomes a caretaker of the water for the entire group, concerning herself with available water and with its consumption. When Josh reveals that he has forgotten the five-gallon water thermos that will keep the group’s water cool, Lucy thinks:

It was July 15th, the quick-baked middle of the hottest month on the river, and we had four full days to get ourselves good and dehydrated under the Utah summer sun in the bottom of a canyon that didn’t know the meaning of the word shade. The drinking water would heat up to ninety degrees in no

time, would taste like the hot insides of a melting plastic jug. A thermos would keep ice through the first day, maybe into the second. We could steal half a block a day from the food cooler after that. (54)

So Lucy walks and hitchhikes through the night, thirty-six miles in all, in order to purchase a new thermos. But Lucy's concern with water does not end after she acquires the thermos. She interrupts an argument between Henry and Thea about men's and women's rafting capabilities to ask, "Is everyone drinking enough water?... Has everyone peed at least once today?" (61).

In "Cataract," as in "Selway," previous rafters drown, serving as a warning or an admonishment to the protagonists. However, in "Cataract," most, if not all, of the drowned rafters are men. Lucy observes, "Five people were dead at the bottom of Satan's Gut already, the season barely three weeks old" (50). Of these five, three are men, and two are "experienced boaters," "out to have a little fun," whose gender is not mentioned. Thea and Lucy agree, however, that these boaters are "Just like us" (51). These drownings free Lucy and Thea from the remaining strictures that have defined the interconnectedness between women's sexuality and their relationship with water. In Lucy and Thea's world, men are more likely to drown than women, and if these men's drowning is a sexual punishment, it is so in the sense that they are listening to their foolish, testosterone-driven impulses: two of the dead are a father and son, who made a mistake that could only have come from being too inexperienced to run this river, and another "was that crazy who tried to swim the whole series [of rapids] at highwater each year" (51). He made it for five years, but this year "he was dead before he even got to the Big Drops" (51).

Lucy and Thea and their male companions are not dead before they get to the Big Drops, and in fact, when they get to Big Drop 1, “Thea and I eased through it with so much finesse it was a little scary, the water pounding all around us, my hands strong on the oars. Thea was ready to bail at any second, but we were so well lined up, so precise in our timing, and the river so good to us we hardly took on enough water to make it worthwhile” (65). Lucy’s perception of the river as being a sentient being who can be “good to” them reflects her closeness to nature generally and water especially. If Janie and Tea Cake are imperiled because of their separation from nature, then Lucy and Thea are saved because of their connectedness to it.

However, skilled though Lucy is, she has limits that seem sensible, but simultaneously reflect her lack of self-assuredness. Before Big Drops 2 and 3, she “looked hard at the boat carnage that littered the sides of the canyon” and announces “for the first time in my boating career” that this river is too big for her (65). Her friends convince her to change her mind. Unfortunately, Josh guides the group through the rapids, and his strategy is one of reckless opposition to the water rather than finesse and oneness with it. This strategy almost kills them all:

I saw Josh’s boat disappear, vertically, as though it had fallen over a cliff, and I realized in that moment we *were* too far right, *way* too far right, and we were about to go straight down over the seven-story rock. We would fall through the air off the face of that rock, land at the bottom of a seven-story waterfall, where there would be nothing but rocks and tree limbs and sixty-some thousand feet per second of pounding white water which would shake us and crush us and hold us under until we drowned. (67)

They hit the water hard, Thea is thrown from the boat, and “Then everything went dark, and there was nothing around me but water and I was breathing it in, helpless to fight it as it wrapped itself around me and tossed me so hard I thought I would break before I drowned” (68). But although Lucy and Thea both survive this watery catastrophe, and they are even able to grab their boat, they realize they are not going to be able to get in the boat, and “were going to have to face Satan’s Gut in our life jackets after all” (69). Surprisingly, Josh is able to yell one good piece of advice to them, to leave the boat which is headed toward deadly rocks. Houston uses another feminine metaphor to describe the rapids as Lucy navigates Satan’s Gut without a boat: “The white water grabbed me for a minute and shook me hard, like an angry airport mother, and then just as roughly it spat me out, it let me go” (70). She and Thea both eventually manage to get into the other boat, locate their own (somewhat damaged) boat, and instead of quitting after their harrowing ordeal, they get back in and finish riding the river.

Henry and Russell give Josh credit for saving the day, and for being an effective guide, completely unaware that his faulty navigation almost killed Lucy and Thea. Henry even asserts, “Josh had it under control right from the beginning” (73). The men’s lack of self-awareness contrasts completely with Lucy and Thea’s desires. Thea wants the men to say “that they were glad we made it,” wishing to be valued for herself, while Lucy, the river-goddess, wants them to ask, “*tell me what it felt like under there*” (74), wishing to be admired or at least acknowledged for her courage.

Current fiction by women, then, still incorporates the drowning motif, as does fiction by men. In the fiction by women, female characters are becoming more physically powerful and more emotionally self-aware, although they still make judgmental errors when

choosing partners— the narrator of “Selway” is just as frustrated with Jack, in her way, as Edna is with Léonce. Contemporary male authors such as Dybek demonstrate indebtedness, whether conscious or not, not only to their male antecedents, but also to their female ones. Surely, we will see more of these “survival narratives,” in which women who would have been pulled under a century before emerge from the water triumphant and ready to face the next set of rapids.

CONCLUSION: THE PAST AND THE FUTURE OF THE DROWNED WOMAN MOTIF

For at least four centuries, drowning and women have been closely connected in literature. Many women characters have been silenced by their own element, the water, as a punishment for her sexuality. At the beginning of the twentieth century, though, a change in the depiction of the drowned woman emerged. Drowning became first a choice, and then a survivable event. Near-drownings, rather than deaths by drowning, became more frequent in twentieth-century North American fiction by women. Until mid-century, however, these nearly-drowned women still usually relied on men to save them from death. By the last two decades of the twentieth century, though, some women characters were saving their own lives without reliance on a man. The next step on the continuum will, I imagine, be fiction in which women save their male companions from drowning, or fiction in which women will be both able to save themselves and to have stable and loving relationships with their men. Alternatively, of course, there could be a literary backlash against these independent and non-drowning literary characters. It will be interesting to trace this motif over the next several decades.

One of the primary conflicts in contemporary drowning-motif fiction, such as that of Margaret Atwood and Pam Houston, is the difficulty women characters have in reconciling their physical and emotional strength with their need to have an equal partnership with a man. Quite frequently, the men in their lives are uncomfortable with this much equality, and just as often, the women (Atwood's Joan and Emma, Houston's Lucy) experience internal

conflicts between their desire to be loved and their need to be independent. There are few (if any) women in Atwood's or Houston's fiction who experience the satisfaction that Janie derived from her marriage to Tea Cake. Resolving these internal conflicts will be one of the tasks open to contemporary women writers who continue to write about near-drownings.

The motif of the drowned woman has been a popular one for hundreds of years. Only in recent decades have writers been able to create women characters who are able to survive their near-drowning experiences. As women's roles become less rigidly defined, and expectations for women's sexual conduct become less restrictive in life, then women are less likely to drown in literature.

The motif of drowned and nearly-drowned women in literature raises many questions, only some of which are addressed here. Further directions for study include an exploration of the psychological ramifications of drownings in literature, for which a analysis of the works of Carl Jung might be useful. A further analysis of the masculine role in the drowning motif would, I think, be a valuable contribution to the scholarship, as well.

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